

Voices of Bengal:

**Local Cultural Expression in Rabindranath
Tagore's Personal Letters (1879-1898)**

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Published by

Literature.
Chronicle

Paradise 24, Durg Division, 491559, Chhattisgarh, India

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Published Month: March

Title: - Voices of Bengal: Local Cultural Expression in Rabindranath Tagore's Personal Letters (1879-1898)

ISBN: 978-93-7724-654-9

DOI: <https://literaturechronicle.com/doi-2026-55880>

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Foreword

When we return to the private archive of a writer, we do not merely read what was written; we listen for the silences, the hesitations, the textures of an inner world that later becomes a civilization's public memory. This manuscript, *Voices of Bengal: Local Cultural Expression in Rabindranath Tagore's Personal Letters (1879–1898)*, evokes a familiar intellectual thrill, one that arises when the personal is read with scholarly patience, transforming the intimate into a gateway to cultural history.

These letters belong to the Rabindranath, who was still becoming Tagore. They reveal a young mind negotiating the world through its languages, rituals, discomforts, and unanticipated beauty. What the author of this study has done, with admirable clarity and discipline, is to read these twenty-three letters not as biographical curiosities but as cultural texts. By employing James Paul Gee's vocabulary-based discourse analysis, the book demonstrates how Tagore's lexical choices, though simple words, carry within them the layered consciousness of late nineteenth-century Bengal.

This, to me, is the most striking contribution of the work before you: it restores to Tagore's correspondence the dignity of cultural testimony. It reminds us that the local is never merely local. It is a living epistemology encoded in gestures, sounds, idioms, griefs, domestic details, and how a young writer looks at

rivers, sky, rain, and rural life. Each vocabulary item, whether it belongs to the domain of “Big C” culture with its history and institutions, or “small c” culture with its daily negotiations of life, becomes a signpost in a larger story about identity and belonging.

The author’s decision to frame these letters as sites where Bengali and English sensibilities meet is particularly valuable. Tagore’s linguistic hybridity, involved in his effortless movement between affection, critique, humor, and philosophical intuition, reveals both the vulnerability and the quiet resilience of a colonized consciousness. The book shows how he simultaneously absorbs, negotiates, and transforms English cultural codes while remaining rooted in the emotional geography of Bengal. This nuanced reading enriches our understanding of Tagore as not only a poet of universal humanism but also a meticulous chronicler of the local.

As someone who has spent a lifetime engaging with literature, performance, and cultural memory, I appreciate the methodological restraint and conceptual clarity with which this study has been undertaken. In a moment when scholarship often rushes towards abstraction, this work brings us back to the groundedness of words to their histories, their cultural burdens, and their subtle worlds.

This book is, therefore, more than a commentary on Tagore’s letters. It is an invitation to read slowly, to listen

attentively, and to recognize that cultural identity is woven not only through public events and monuments but also through private utterances, familiar idioms, inherited gestures, and the everyday emotional life of a people.

I commend this work for its rigorous scholarly integrity, its nuanced sense of cultural responsibility, and its meticulous elucidation of Tagore's nascent epistolary universe. This work can serve as a foundational resource for those exploring Tagore's early correspondence, providing valuable insights into his development as a thinker and writer. It is expected to deepen understanding of his cultural and literary context, while also establishing a scholarly benchmark for future studies in this area.

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Acknowledgement

I am profoundly grateful to Almighty Allah for His endless blessings, guidance, and strength throughout this journey. I also pay my deepest respect to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), whose life and teachings have been a constant source of inspiration.

I owe my heartfelt gratitude to my father Md Mainul Hoque and mother Mastara Bibi and family members, whose unwavering love, encouragement, and prayers have been the cornerstone of my strength and perseverance. I extend my special gratitude to my siblings and my wife, Sabnam Parvin, for their love, patience, and constant encouragement. Their support has been an unfailing source of strength throughout this journey.

My deepest thanks go to my M.Phil mentor, Dr. Joy Anuradha, whose invaluable guidance, insightful supervision, and constant encouragement have shaped my academic path. Her intellectual rigor and moral support not only enriched my research but also inspired me to grow as a scholar and as an individual. I remain deeply indebted to my M.Phil. supervisor for her guidance and intellectual generosity, which continue to resonate in this book.

My heartfelt thanks to Prof. Vibha Sharma, a distinguished National Teaching Awardee honoured by the President of India, for her thoughtful and inspiring foreword to this book. Her gracious support and uplifting words add immense value to this book.

This book is an extended outcome of my M.Phil. dissertation, originally submitted at the University of Hyderabad. The dissertation laid the foundation for my monograph, and over time, I have revisited, revised, and expanded its scope to address broader questions and contribute more meaningfully to the field. In transforming the thesis into this book, I have sought not only to preserve its core arguments but also to enhance them with additional perspectives, insights, and critical reflections.

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Introduction

This book, *Voices of Bengal: Local Cultural Expression in Rabindranath Tagore's Personal Letters (1879-1898)*, presents how local culture is articulated in the personal correspondence of Rabindranath Tagore during the formative years of his life. The book illuminates twenty-three letters written between 1879 and 1898. These letters, selected from the first two chapters: "Youthful Bravado" and "Zamindar" of *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (1997), provide valuable insights into the cultural milieu of late nineteenth-century Bengal.

Tagore's letters, written to his family members and friends, are not only intimate personal narratives but also enrich cultural texts that mirror everyday life, social practices, and the changing nature of Bengal. Tagore provides vivid descriptions of contemporary events, social dynamics, and the natural surroundings of his homeland. To interpret these cultural representations, this book employs James Paul Gee's discourse analysis toolkit (*How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, 2011), with a particular focus on the "vocabulary tool." Vocabulary, as Gee suggests, is central to the construction of meaning, ideology, and cultural

identity, making it a valuable lens for examining how Tagore's words capture the essence of local culture.

The analysis emphasizes both the visible and the subtle, embedded aspects of culture in Tagore's letters. Through the vocabulary tool, the book highlights recurring cultural themes: regional identity, religious rituals, rustic domestic life, local names, the natural environment, and the interaction between Bengali and English cultural values. To provide a detailed understanding, the book adopts two cultural frameworks: "Big C" culture, which refers to institutional, historical, and literary dimensions, and "small c" culture, which encompasses everyday practices, values, and lived experiences. These dual lenses help to illuminate the cultural richness of Tagore's letters and the way they bridge personal experience with collective identity.

The findings of this book demonstrate that Tagore's letters serve as an important resource for understanding the local features of Bengal in the late nineteenth century. Vocabulary items identified in the analysis reveal both "Big C" and "small c" cultural elements, with some words and expressions overlapping the two categories, thereby accentuating the complexity of cultural representation. This book argues that Tagore's personal letters are not merely biographical documents but cultural texts that preserve and

reflect the voices of Bengal and its traditions, rituals, landscapes, and the lived realities of its people.

Structure of the Book

This book is organized into the following chapters:

Chapter I: Contextualizing Tagore’s Epistolary World through Culture and Discourse

This chapter introduces the cultural and historical background of Bengal during the late nineteenth century, with a focus on Tagore’s early life and the significance of his personal letters.

Chapter II: Vocabulary as Cultural Archive: Gee’s Analytical Tools Applied to Tagore’s Correspondence

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of discourse analysis and the relevance of Gee’s “vocabulary tool.” Using Gee’s discourse analysis toolkit, this chapter examines how specific vocabulary items shape cultural meaning, reflecting both “Big C” and “small c” cultural elements. It also explores cases where these categories overlap.

Chapter III: Local Cultural Expressions in Tagore's Letters

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of selected letters, highlighting cultural representations related to regional identity, religious rituals, rustic household practices, and depictions of rural Bengal.

Chapter IV: Negotiating Cultures: Bengali and English Influences

This chapter explores Tagore's engagement with English cultural practices alongside his deep attachment to Bengali traditions, demonstrating how his letters reveal a process of negotiation between colonial influence and indigenous identity.

Chapter V: Negotiating the Local and the Universal: Cultural Reflections in Tagore's Letters

The final chapter summarizes the key findings, emphasizing how Tagore's letters serve as cultural texts that preserve the local voices of Bengal. It also reflects on the broader implications of studying personal correspondence as a site of cultural expression.

Chapter I

Contextualizing Tagore's Epistolary World through Culture and Discourse

The letter, as one of the earliest forms of human communication, embodies the art of expressing thought, emotion, and intellect across space and time. Long before the advent of modern technological media, letters served as the principal conduit for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and reflections. They were not merely instruments of correspondence but also vehicles for self-expression, intellectual debate, and cultural articulation. Through the act of letter writing, individuals cultivated habits of critical reading, introspection, and polemical discourse, transforming personal communication into a site of literary and cultural production (Altman, 1982; Barton & Hall, 2000).

Letters, despite their intimate and subjective nature, often transcend the personal to mirror the socio-cultural milieu of their times. Embedded within these seemingly private narratives are traces of the collective consciousness, expressions of prevailing social attitudes, political ideologies, and cultural norms. Every letter, therefore,

becomes a repository of the lived realities of its era, reflecting the intricate interplay between individual subjectivity and the broader historical and cultural context (Jolly & Stanley, 2005). As a cultural artifact, the letter captures the essence of the human condition in its specific social and geographical contexts, rendering it invaluable to scholars seeking to reshape the cultural imagination of a period.

This book explores Rabindranath Tagore's personal letters written between 1879 and 1898, examining how they represent the local culture of Bengal during the late nineteenth century. Tagore's correspondences, addressed to an astonishing range of recipients, including family members, poets, writers, educators, scientists, reformers, and political figures, form a vibrant mosaic of intellectual and cultural exchanges. His letters articulate themes central to his philosophical worldview: Indian traditionalism, nationalism, humanism, cosmopolitanism, freedom of mind, and the epistemology of interpretation (Chakraborty, 2015; Hogan, 2001). Yet, amid these broader philosophical reflections, Tagore consistently returns to the immediacy of local life in Bengal through its rhythms, landscapes, social customs, and cultural sensibilities.

Tagore's letters thus stand as a record of Bengal's cultural identity during a transformative historical moment. They illuminate the interdependence of culture and everyday life, unveiling how religion, attire, economic systems, social hierarchies, and political consciousness coalesced to shape the Bengali worldview. The local culture, in this sense, represents not merely a geographical or linguistic identity but a lived experience, a composite of practices, beliefs, and emotions that define the ethos of a community (Sarkar, 2011). Through his letters, Tagore presents this world with remarkable sensitivity, blending subjective introspection with astute social observation. His correspondence evokes the local color of Bengal with a lyrical immediacy that bridges the personal and the collective, the emotional and the ethnographic.

By engaging with Tagore's letters from his early adulthood, this monograph seeks to uncover the textual landscapes of Bengali culture as constructed through his epistolary discourse. Each letter, while personal in intent, unfolds as a cultural text that documents the aesthetic sensibilities, social realities, and intellectual currents of its time. In doing so, letters present not only the evolution of his thought but also the embeddedness of his vision in the local and lived contexts of Bengal. This book traces these

representations to show how Tagore, through the intimacy of the letter form, captured the pulse of a people and a period, transforming the private act of communication into a profound articulation of cultural consciousness.

Rabindranath Tagore: The Renaissance Spirit of Modern India

Rabindranath Tagore, often celebrated as the “Renaissance man of modern India,” occupies an unparalleled position in the literary and cultural history of Bengal and the world. Born in 1861 into the illustrious *Thakur* family of *Jorasanko*, Calcutta, a nucleus of Bengal’s cultural and intellectual ferment, Tagore’s early years were marked by a rare combination of privilege and introspection. The environment of *Jorasanko* was a confluence of music, art, philosophy, and reformist zeal, which deeply shaped the young poet’s imagination and worldview (Dutta & Robinson, 1995). Writing under the pen name *Bhanusinha Thakur (Bhonita)*, Tagore began composing poems at an early age, gradually emerging as one of the foremost voices of India’s literary modernity.

Tagore’s genius traversed boundaries of genre, language, and discipline. A prolific writer, he produced an astonishing range of works, including poetry, novels, plays, short stories, essays, and songs, each infused with a profound

sensitivity to human emotion and philosophical depth (Sen, 2011). In the later years of his life, he ventured into painting, thereby adding yet another dimension to his artistic personality. As a polymath, philosopher, musician, dramatist, and educationist, Tagore revitalized Bengali literature and art with an unprecedented aesthetic modernism that reechoed deeply with the intellectual currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1913, Tagore became the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for *Gitanjali*, a collection of 157 poems that introduced the world to the spiritual lyricism of Bengal (Tagore, 1913/2005). Revered as *Biswakabi*, *Kabiguru*, and *Gurudev*, his works transcend the local to embrace the universal, articulating the human spirit's quest for harmony, love, and freedom. A Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, Tagore was deeply engaged in the broader intellectual movements of Asia and the West. His personal life, too, reflected his composite worldview: his marriage to Mrinalini Devi and his role as a father to five children, including Renuka, Shamindranath, Meera, Rathindranath, and Madhurilata, highlight the tender human dimensions behind his philosophical grandeur.

The letters of Tagore, many of which were written from Shantiniketan and various journeys across India and

abroad, offer an intimate lens into his thoughts and milieu. Scholars such as Chakravarty (2015) have emphasized that “Tagore's letters add fresh personal notes about his life, relatives, faith, and the idea of nationalism, anti-colonialism, and his relations with national and international leaders” (p. 142). The correspondence also sheds light on his reflections on attire, manners, religious sensibilities, and the socio-political realities of colonial Bengal. His lived experience within the opulent yet reformist *Thakur* household found detailed representation in works such as *The Home and the World* (1916) and *Kabuliwala* (1892), where Tagore juxtaposed the personal and the political, the intimate and the ideological.

Early Literary Endeavors

Tagore's literary journey began remarkably early. His first published work appeared in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on February 25, 1875. Educated under the guidance of his brother Satyendranath Tagore, one of the first Indian members of the Indian Civil Service, young Rabindranath was introduced to Western education, philosophy, and the English language. Another brother, Dwijendranath Tagore, nurtured his literary impulses by editing the Bengali monthly *Bharati*. In 1879, Tagore accompanied Satyendranath to England, where he studied English literature under Professor

Henry Morley and developed an enduring interest in Western music (Radice, 2011).

Upon his return to India in 1880, Tagore immersed himself in creative work, producing two verse plays, *Valmiki Pratibha* and *Mriyigapa*, both of which were staged at his family residence, with Tagore himself in the lead role. His subsequent works, including *Rudrachakra* (1882) and *Sandhya Sangeet* (1882), drew admiration from literary contemporaries such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who recognized in Tagore, a genius capable of reshaping Bengali poetics. The early 1880s marked both personal and emotional turning points: his marriage to the young Mrinalini Devi in 1883 and the untimely death of Kadambari Devi in 1884, whose companionship had been central to his youth, profoundly influenced the emotional tenor of his writing (Dutta & Robinson, 1995).

In 1891, Tagore founded the monthly journal *Sadhana*, which became a platform for his essays, stories, and reflections on society, faith, and reform. These early works illuminate not only Tagore's literary maturation but also his embeddedness in a family of reformers and intellectuals whose cultural legacy shaped the geography of modern Bengal.

My Life in My Words: The Self in History

Rabindranath Tagore's *My Life in My Words* stands as a self-reflexive testament to a life lived amidst the ferment of colonial Bengal. This autobiographical narrative captures Tagore's philosophical musings, aesthetic sensibilities, and moral reflections with remarkable candor and calmness. His prose resonates with a tranquil wisdom that renders his accounts of nature, society, and politics deeply evocative. The text engages with the socio-political and cultural realities of his time, like rituals, religious practices, attire, financial disparities, social hierarchy, and education, all narrated through a lens of humanistic contemplation.

The autobiography also situates Tagore within the global context of his era. It offers his interpretations of the two World Wars, his critique of nationalism, his understanding of European imperialism, and his reflections on the fraught relationship between India and the West. His acute observation of Bengal's changing landscape, both cultural and ecological, unveils a writer deeply invested in documenting the flux of modernity. As Chakravarty (2015) observes, Tagore's letters and autobiographical writings together "mirror the very soul of Bengal's Renaissance, its conflicts, aspirations, and contradictions" (p. 146).

In *My Life in My Words*, Tagore not only records his personal experiences but also builds a dialogic narrative of

civilization itself, intertwining the local with the global, and the intimate with the historical. His reflections bridge his artistic, philosophical, and political identities, reaffirming his stature as a writer whose life was inseparable from the times he sought to understand and transform.

Rabindranath Tagore as a Nationalist and Internationalist: From the Nation to the World

Rabindranath Tagore occupies an exceptional position in the intellectual and cultural history of modern India. Although his worldview cannot be confined within the narrow boundaries of conventional nationalism, Tagore's deep engagement with the moral, spiritual, and political concerns of his time made him one of the most profound nationalist figures in India's freedom movement. His nationalism, however, was unlike the militant or chauvinistic models that gained popularity during the late colonial period. It was rooted instead in humanism, in the recognition of the inherent dignity of all people, and in his critique of the oppressive structures that colonialism had imposed upon Indian society.

Ashis Nandy (as cited in Hassan, 2014) offers an illuminating comparative analysis of Tagore's and Gandhi's conceptualizations of nationalism in *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*. While acknowledging that both men respected

one another deeply, Nandy observes that their views, though intersecting on moral and spiritual grounds, diverged significantly in practice. Tagore was the first to address Gandhi as “Mahatma,” and Gandhi reciprocated by calling him “Gurudev.” These gestures symbolized mutual reverence yet underscored ideological differences, especially in their understanding of nationhood and its moral foundations. According to Nandy, Humayun Kabir rightly observed that Tagore was among the first great Indians to challenge Eurocentrism, seeking to restore India’s ancient connections with Asia and Africa and to position the nation as a moral rather than political entity (as cited in Hassan, 2014, p. 13).

In *Nationalism*, Tagore articulated a vision of the nation that transcended political boundaries. His reflections on nationalism were both prophetic and critical, forewarning the perils of blind patriotism and aggressive nationalism. As Nandy (1994) notes, Tagore “acknowledged the sanctity of the anti-colonial revolution and the futility of the ‘begging’ system for ‘scraps’ used by the early Indian National Congress,” yet simultaneously rejected “extremist ideals focused on Western culture” (p. 7). His patriotism was thus ethical, inclusive, and aesthetic, refusing to indulge in violence or exclusionary rhetoric. Nandy further observes

that Tagore's version of patriotism stood in direct opposition to the notion of a "single ethnic Hindu Rashtra," viewing such an idea as "anti-Indian and even anti-Hindu" (as cited in Hassan, 2014, p. 14).

Kundra (as cited in Hassan, 2014, p. 23) expands on Tagore's participation in the national movement, noting that although he never joined the revolutionary activities of his contemporaries, he was never wholly detached from them. His nationalism was distinct in its moral orientation and artistic expression. In 1896, he inaugurated the Congress session in Kolkata with his musical rendition of *Vande Mataram*, epitomizing his cultural rather than political commitment to India's awakening. Through his poetry, songs, and letters, Tagore transformed the idiom of nationalism from political rhetoric into a moral and aesthetic discourse of liberation. His humanist reimagining of nationalism eventually evolved into an internationalist vision, an ideal of universal human solidarity that transcended the territorial and ideological confines of the nation-state.

Tagore as an Internationalist

Tagore's intellectual journey from patriotism to internationalism exposes a profound moral evolution. His internationalism was not the rejection of India but its

spiritual extension, a conviction that true freedom could only be realized in a world liberated from the tyranny of narrow national identities. Disenchanted with the aggressive nationalism of his time, Tagore became an advocate of universal humanism and global peace. As Collins (2013) notes, “Tagore becomes a straw man for postcolonial critique,” for his vision resisted the binary of colonialism versus nationalism, suggesting instead that anti-colonial struggle must take the form of “social and religious non-instrumental rejuvenation” (p.153). In Tagore’s utopian imagination, “the world is one nest,” an abode where humanity could coexist beyond divisions of race, religion, and territory.

Tagore’s critique of nationalism was inseparable from his advocacy of education and cultural dialogue. For him, education was the cornerstone of international understanding. The foundation of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan during World War I was not merely an educational initiative but an embodiment of his cosmopolitan vision. As Bhattacharya (2015) observes, Tagore’s idea of internationalism emerged in three dimensions: first, as a rejection of Western imperial models; second, as a counterpoint to the emergent League of Nations and the idealized internationalism of the West; and third, as

a moral and spiritual movement rooted in the interconnectedness of human life. Visva-Bharati, conceived as a place “where the world meets in one nest,” sought to cultivate a spirit of global fellowship without the arrogance of nationalism. Its mission was to promote racial harmony, mutual respect, and intellectual cooperation across civilizations.

Tagore’s internationalism was neither a political program nor an abstract philosophy; it was an ethical and spiritual doctrine. It repudiated exclusivity, aggression, and domination, whether expressed through empire, race, or class. His rejection of European, Japanese, and Soviet imperialism alike demonstrates the moral consistency of his universal humanism. In his view, aggression, however justified in the name of national necessity, remained “inhuman” and “unethical.” For Tagore, the true foundation of civilization lay not in power but in compassion, and not in dominance but in dialogue. His faith in humanity was the moral cornerstone of his internationalism.

At the same time, Tagore’s letters reveal an acute consciousness of his Bengali identity. His deep affection for the local culture, language, and landscape is evident in his personal correspondence. Even as he dreamt of a universal human fellowship, he celebrated the textures of Bengali life

through its songs, festivals, and rural rhythms, as expressions of a larger human truth. Thus, in Tagore's vision, the local and the universal were never oppositional but mutually sustaining. His rooted cosmopolitanism allowed him to speak to the world from the soil of Bengal, transforming his personal and cultural identity into a universal moral voice.

The selected letters span the period 1879 to 1898, a time of intellectual ferment and artistic awakening in Tagore's life. The letters are addressed to some of his closest companions, Kadambari Devi (his sister-in-law and confidante), Mrinalini Devi (his wife), Priyanath Sen (a trusted friend), and Indira Devi Chaudhurani (his aunt and literary associate). Each letter is anchored in a distinct personal and situational context, providing a mosaic of Tagore's lived experiences, reflections, and creative impulses.

Nature occupies a central presence in these letters. Tagore often writes in rapturous admiration of the natural world, an admiration reminiscent of Wordsworthian romanticism, whom he explicitly acknowledges as a source of inspiration. His references to flora and fauna, including birds, flowers, and animals such as the deer and hen, are not mere embellishments but serve as metaphors for serenity,

purity, and the essential harmony of existence. The repeated invocation of natural imagery emphasizes his belief that tranquility and peace constitute the essence of life. These letters thus become a lyrical record of his deep emotional and aesthetic response to the world around him and a testimony to what may be termed his *ecological humanism*.

A striking thematic undercurrent in these letters is Tagore's ambivalent attitude toward urban and rural life. His letter highlights a pronounced disinterest, even disillusionment, with the monotony and moral dullness of city life, particularly in reference to Calcutta and Devon, which he describes as grimy and spiritually lifeless. In contrast, his descriptions of rural Bengal are suffused with affection and nostalgia. The countryside, with its expansive skies, solitary rivers, and unhurried rhythm, represents for him a space of spiritual renewal and aesthetic fulfillment. Through these contrasts, Tagore presents a subtle critique of industrial modernity and urban alienation, positioning the rural world as a site of authenticity and harmony.

The letters are also a treasury of cultural representation. Tagore vividly depicts Bengali rituals, music, attire, and domestic practices, providing glimpses into both the material and symbolic dimensions of local life. His references to musical instruments like the piano, to ritual

events such as *Swayamvara*, and to household customs expose his sensitivity to the interplay between tradition and change. The portrayal of gender roles, family bonds, and social ceremonies attests to his deep engagement with the textures of Bengali local culture. His tone often betrays a tender affection for these cultural details, suggesting that for Tagore, culture was not a static inheritance but a living, breathing experience.

In several letters, Tagore reflects upon the hierarchical relationship between Indians and the English, noting the pervasive sense of inferiority felt by Indians in matters of spirituality, politics, and social organization. Yet, even as he acknowledges this imbalance, he articulates a distinct Bengali identity, resilient and dignified in its cultural self-expression. This negotiation between admiration and resistance captures Tagore's complex position within the colonial encounter.

Thematically, the letters traverse a vast intellectual terrain including naturalism, socialism, politics, economics, religion, ritual, culture, localization, globalization, and social consciousness. They offer not only a glimpse into Tagore's personal world but also a mirror to the socio-political landscape of late nineteenth-century Bengal. Beneath their lyrical grace lies a futuristic vision, an

awareness of change, conflict, and continuity that foreshadows the philosophical concerns of his later works.

However, these twenty-three letters were purposefully chosen for their representative richness and cultural resonance and trace the contours of Tagore's local cultural imagination, situating it within broader historical and global currents.

The book explores the representation of local culture in the personal letters of Rabindranath Tagore, employing Paul Gee's discourse analytic tool of "vocabulary." These letters, addressed primarily to close family members and associates, offer more than mere glimpses of personal sentiment; they stand as reflective texts where the poet's observations of nature, society, and locality find lucid and lyrical articulation.

By applying Gee's model of discourse analysis, the book examines how lexical choices and discursive structures encode the meanings of "local" and "cultural" in Tagore's letters. Here, vocabulary is not viewed simply as a linguistic component but as a cultural signifier that embodies a worldview. Through language, Tagore renders his perception of the everyday, including sights, sounds, and sentiments of late nineteenth-century Bengal, thus transforming the ordinary into a tapestry of lived experience.

The conceptual framework for this monograph is based on Brooks, Hall, Chen, Lee, and Peterson's (1991) classification of "Big C" and "small c" cultures. While "Big C" culture encompasses the canonical and institutional forms of civilization: literature, history, and art, "small c" culture refers to the informal, everyday practices and social behaviors that shape community life. This book employs these dual lenses to understand how Tagore's letters function as texts of cultural expression, bridging the boundaries between grand cultural narratives and the quotidian realities of rural Bengal.

Before engaging with the letters, it is essential to consider what local signifies within this context. Localization may be understood as a network of emotional and cognitive attachments to a specific place, expressed through social, political, historical, and cultural systems. As Ulf Hannerz (1996) aptly observes, "the cosmopolitans and locals have a common interest in the survival of cultural diversity... there can be no cosmopolitan without the local" (p. 16). The local and global, therefore, are not antithetical but mutually constitutive, each deriving meaning from the other. This dialectic relationship forms the philosophical foundation of the present book. The book is guided by three central arguments:

1. Tagore's letters articulate local culture through recurring thematic motifs such as nature, rural life, music, ritual, and domesticity, wherein the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of everyday Bengali existence emerge as integral to his moral and philosophical worldview. Through these themes, Tagore transforms ordinary cultural practices into expressions of collective identity, situating local sensibilities within broader discourses of humanism and creative consciousness.

2. The interplay of "Big C" and "small c" cultures within Tagore's correspondence demonstrates a dynamic continuum rather than a binary distinction, where institutional aspects of civilization (literature, art, and social order) coexist and intertwine with the subtler patterns of communication, behavior, and belief. The letters unveil how these two cultural dimensions constantly overlap, each enriching the other, thereby reflecting the organic fusion of formal and lived culture in Tagore's vision of Bengali life.

3. Tagore's engagement with English cultural practices, juxtaposed with his profound attachment

to Bengali traditions, exemplifies a negotiation between colonial influence and indigenous selfhood. His letters become a site of cultural translation, where linguistic hybridity and intercultural awareness coexist with an enduring commitment to local ethos, ultimately illustrating how Tagore redefines modernity through the prism of Bengali cultural consciousness.

Through this framework, the book aims to interpret Tagore's letters as discursive acts of cultural memory and representation. By limiting the corpus to letters from this period (1879-1898), the book captures Tagore's transition from an observer of the local to a philosopher of the universal, illuminating how the seeds of his global humanism were first nurtured in the soil of Bengal. In doing so, it positions these letters not merely as private communications but as cultural texts that chronicle the interplay of locality, identity, and belonging in a rapidly changing world.

The central objective of this book is to examine how local culture is constructed, mediated, and represented in Tagore's letters through the linguistic and stylistic dimensions of vocabulary. Language here functions both as

a vehicle of expression and as a site of cultural negotiation, unveiling the intricate social and emotional landscapes of nineteenth-century Bengal.

More specifically, the book pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore how Tagore's lexical and stylistic choices capture the social and cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Bengal, reflecting the lived realities, values, and sensibilities of the period.
2. To identify the recurrent themes, motifs, and linguistic markers that signify local culture within the selected letters, and uncover the subtle interplay between text, context, and cultural expression.
3. To analyze the coexistence and interaction between "Big C" and "small c" cultures in Tagore's correspondence, showing how institutional, literary, and intellectual forms of culture intersect with everyday practices, manners, and emotional registers.
4. To contribute to the broader discourse on language, culture, and identity, particularly within the

frameworks of discourse analysis and Tagore studies, by demonstrating how vocabulary operates as a semiotic marker of cultural meaning and negotiation.

Tagore's letters occupy a unique position at the crossroads of linguistic hybridity and cultural translation. His deep engagement with English cultural practices coexists with an enduring attachment to Bengali traditions, creating a dynamic dialogue between the colonial and the indigenous. These letters become sites of negotiation, where Tagore redefines the contours of modernity through a Bengali cultural consciousness. His correspondence thus constitutes a polyphonic archive, a record where the global and the vernacular, the English and the Bengali, the colonial and the native continuously converge and contest, producing a narrative of identity, belonging, and resistance.

While Tagore's letters have been the focus of extensive critical inquiry, the dimension of local culture has remained curiously underexplored. Previous scholars have illuminated various aspects of his correspondence: Edward (1976) praised their lyrical clarity and expressive power; Radice (1993) examined Tagore's social and political concerns; Sutherland (1998) studied his negotiation between

modernism and traditionalism; Aparajita (1998) foregrounded his reflections on nationalism and equality; Roy and Sen (2012) explored philosophical resonances; Dasgupta (2014) highlighted his literary versatility; Sen (2015) examined his spiritual insights; and Chakraborty (2015) analyzed his anti-colonial thought. Although these studies collectively enrich Tagore scholarship, they seldom engage with how local idioms, sensibilities, and rhythms are articulated through his linguistic practice. The present book, therefore, fills this critical gap by focusing on how Tagore's vocabulary captures the textures of locality and the dialects of everyday life, the rural landscapes, and the cultural consciousness inscribed within his words.

By situating the analysis within a discourse-analytic framework, the monograph repositions Tagore's letters as texts of cultural embodiment, where language itself becomes both medium and message. The book ultimately demonstrates that Tagore's correspondence transcends the personal to emerge as a collective cultural narrative, one in which the local is not merely geographical but emotional, experiential, imaginative and a living testament to the evolving identity of Bengal in a colonial world.

Chapter II

Vocabulary as Cultural Archive: Gee's Analytical Tools Applied to Tagore's Correspondence

James Paul Gee is widely recognized as one of the leading figures in the field of discourse studies. His theoretical contributions have redefined the study of language as a form of social practice, asserting that discourse cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and social contexts in which it is produced. In his influential book *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, Gee emphasizes that both spoken and written texts are imbued with social meaning and must be interpreted through the lens of discourse as situated action.

This work builds upon his earlier seminal text, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* (1999; revised eds. 2005, 2010, 2014), where Gee advances an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates insights from applied linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology, and communication studies. His approach positions language-in-use as central to understanding how individuals construct, negotiate, and perform identities within specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

In *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, Gee introduces a comprehensive set of twenty-eight analytical tools designed to unveil the multifaceted nature of discourse. These tools are categorized into four principal domains: “Language and Context,” “Saying, Doing, and Designing,” “Building Things in the World,” and “Theoretical Tools.” Among these, the “Vocabulary Tool”, which belongs to the second category, *Saying, Doing, and Designing*, is particularly pertinent to the present book.

The Vocabulary Tool applied to examine how word choices reflect, construct, and sustain cultural realities. It unveils how lexical selections signify not only literal meanings but also embody social attitudes, historical consciousness, and identity formation. Within Tagore’s letters, vocabulary operates as a cultural signifier, encoding aspects of Bengali life, traditions, environment, and sensibility. Through this analytical instrument, the book investigates how Tagore’s language becomes an interface between the local and the global, between the Bengali and the English, and between personal expression and cultural inscription. Thus, the methodological design of this book rests upon a synthesis of discourse theory and cultural analysis, enabling a nuanced exploration of how Tagore’s

letters serve as textual sites where linguistic form, cultural meaning, and aesthetic sensibility converge.

Saying, Doing, and Designing

This unit explores the dynamic relationship between language, action, and design, illustrating how linguistic choices not only convey meaning but also perform functions and construct realities in the world. Drawing upon James Paul Gee's theoretical insights, the discussion moves beyond the traditional container or conduit view of language, which perceives language merely as a vessel for transmitting information and adopts what Gee calls a "building" or "designing" view. In this perspective, language becomes an active and creative process of meaning-making, where speakers and writers design their utterances to shape identities, enact relationships, and construct social worlds.

Gee (2014) identifies six analytical tools that illuminate this performative and constructive dimension of discourse: the Doing and Not Just Saying Tool, the Why This Way and Not That Way Tool, the Integration Tool, the Topic and Theme Tool, the Stanza Tool, and the Vocabulary Tool. Each tool provides a distinct yet interconnected perspective on how language operates as a mode of action, design, and identity formation. The following sections elaborate upon these tools, illustrating their theoretical and

analytical significance in understanding how language functions in situated contexts.

The Doing and Not Just Saying Tool

This tool invites the analyst to move beyond the literal meaning of words to examine the intentional and functional dimensions of speech. It prompts the fundamental question: *What is the speaker trying to accomplish through this interaction?* As Gee (2014) aptly observes, one must “ask not just what the speakers say for any communication, but what they try to do, remembering they may try to do more than one thing, for any communication” (p. 52). In this sense, every utterance becomes a social act, a way of doing things with words, to borrow Austin’s (1962) terminology where the speaker’s language performs actions such as persuading, requesting, asserting, or aligning with others.

The Why This Way and Not That Way Tool

Language, Gee reminds us, is never arbitrary. This tool focuses on the design choices speakers and writers make in shaping their messages. It raises questions such as: *Why is this thought expressed in this particular grammatical form? What alternatives were available, and why were they not chosen?* As Gee (2014) emphasizes, analysts must “always ask how it would say otherwise, what the speaker tried to say, and how he did so, and not in another way” (p. 63).

Every syntactic and stylistic choice reflects a strategic orientation, exposing how individuals position themselves, their interlocutors, and their subject matter within the discursive space.

The Integration Tool

This tool examines the structural coherence of discourse by exploring how clauses and phrases integrate to form meaningful utterances. It directs attention to questions of inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy, and emphasis: *What was foregrounded, and what was backgrounded or omitted?* Gee (2014) asks analysts to consider “what was left behind and what was included in terms of optional arguments” and “how information [is] expressed in the primary, subordinate, and embedded clauses” (p. 68). Through this lens, one can discern how speakers design the flow of information, managing complexity, subordination, and the cognitive load of the listener. The Integration Tool thus emphasizes how grammatical design mirrors cognitive and social priorities within discourse.

The Topic and Theme Tool

The Topic and Theme Tool investigates how speakers and writers organize ideas and manage focus within their utterances. It calls for a close analysis of the thematic and topical structures of clauses: *What serves as the theme? Does*

the theme coincide with the grammatical subject? If not, what motivates this deviation from the unmarked pattern? As Gee (2014) explains, “Why were these choices made? If the theme is not the subject/theme and therefore deviates from the normal (unmarked) preference, what is it and why was it chosen?” (p. 74). Through this inquiry, analysts uncover how speakers construct coherence, maintain perspective, and strategically highlight particular aspects of meaning within an interaction.

The Stanza Tool

The Stanza Tool attends to the organization of discourse into clusters of meaning, what Gee terms “stanzas.” These clusters reflect how ideas, events, or emotions coalesce into larger semantic units within extended speech or text. Identifying stanzas helps the analyst discern the underlying architecture of discourse and the rhythm of thought embedded in communication. Although these clusters may not be immediately evident, they are crucial for interpreting data systematically. As Gee suggests, recognizing stanzas not only aids in organizing interpretation but also enables a more holistic display of meaning, unveiling how speakers structure knowledge narratively and thematically.

The Vocabulary Tool

Finally, the Vocabulary Tool focuses on the lexical dimension of discourse, examining the types of words employed and their social, emotional, and ideological functions. Vocabulary, as Gee (2014) notes, is never neutral; it is a vehicle for constructing social meaning, identity, and stance. Analysts are encouraged to ask, “What sorts of words are being used for the communication? How is the word functioning to mark the communication in terms of style (register, social language)? How does it contribute to the purposes for communicating?” (p. 61). Gee distinguishes between formal and informal vocabulary, yet extends this categorization to include everyday words, formal expressions, and technical lexicon. Each word, in its selection and deployment, reveals the speaker’s positioning within social hierarchies and cultural contexts, making vocabulary an indispensable site for critical analysis.

Descriptions of the Parameters of Analysis

The present book employs vocabulary as a principal analytical tool, chosen for its flexibility and interpretive depth in examining Tagore’s linguistic choices. The vocabulary tool enables an exploration of the textual texture of Tagore’s letters, where language functions not merely as a communicative device but as a repository of cultural identity, emotion, and ideology. Within this framework, the

book also adopts the conceptual dichotomy of “Big C” and “small c” culture to delineate the intersections between institutional and everyday cultural expressions. Together, these parameters form the methodological foundation for examining how Tagore’s use of language negotiates between the local and the global, the formal and the intimate, the Bengali and the English. Both the vocabulary tool and the distinction between the “Big C” and “small c” culture are discussed in detail below.

The Vocabulary Tool

Language is not merely a means of expression; it is a social act, a reflection of thought, ideology, and lived experience. The vocabulary tool, as proposed by James Paul Gee (2011), foregrounds this understanding by asking what kinds of terms are employed in a discourse and what purposes they serve. Vocabulary, therefore, becomes a lens through which meaning, emotion, and ideology are constructed. Gee categorizes vocabulary into formal and informal registers, while also recognizing three gradations of linguistic use: basic everyday words, more formal words, and technical words confined to specific domains. In applying this framework to Tagore’s letters, the analysis raises several pertinent questions: What kinds of vocabulary are employed in particular contexts, and what do they signify? Which

clusters or collocations recur, and what cultural meanings do they carry? How do these lexical choices mirror the socio-cultural ethos of the writer's world?

Such questions guide the discourse analysis, situating Tagore's linguistic choices within the social, geographical, and ideological context of his time. Vocabulary, in this sense, becomes a window into Tagore's perception of his homeland, unveiling how the socio-cultural textures of Bengal are projected, negotiated, and reimagined in his epistolary practice.

By examining synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and other semantic relations, the book decodes how Tagore's vocabulary encodes layers of meaning tied to social hierarchies, cultural memory, and ideological expression. The vocabulary tool thus illuminates the local dimensions of language, exposing the subtle interplay between words and world, between linguistic form and cultural substance.

Understanding Culture: The Visible and the Invisible Dimensions

Culture, in its most profound sense, is the lifeblood of a community and the intricate fabric that weaves together its language, beliefs, customs, rituals, and values into a meaningful way of life. It represents the collective consciousness of people, manifesting in both visible

expressions and invisible undercurrents. The National Center for Cultural Competence defines culture as an “integrated pattern of human activity that involves a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group’s concepts, communications, languages, traditions, ideologies, principles, customs, courtesies, procedures, ways of communicating and responsibilities, relationships, and planned behaviors; and the capacity to pass on the above to future generations” (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.). Culture, therefore, is not a static possession but a living, evolving process transmitted through generations, ensuring the continuity of social identity and belonging.

Language lies at the very heart of culture. It is through language that the world is named, interpreted, and made meaningful. From birth, an individual internalizes not only the linguistic structures of their mother tongue but also the social values, worldviews, and historical memories embedded within it. As Seelye (1976) observed, “Learning a language in isolation from its cultural origins in its contextual usage stops one from being socialized.” Language, then, is not merely a communicative tool; it is the very medium through which culture breathes and survives. Without the context of culture, linguistic knowledge remains

hollow; it is through cultural immersion that one truly understands the emotional and ideological depth of a language.

Scholars have long sought to differentiate between the visible and invisible dimensions of culture. Brooks (1968, as cited in Xiao, 2010) conceptualized two interrelated domains: “Big C” and “small c” culture. The former encompasses the more tangible, formal aspects of civilization, including literature, music, art, architecture, and major historical events and elements that are often celebrated and easily observed. These are the markers of a culture’s grandeur, its artistic and intellectual achievements. In contrast, “small c” culture concerns itself with the subtler, everyday expressions of life: social etiquette, gestures, communication patterns, and shared beliefs that operate beneath the surface of conscious recognition. While “Big C” culture is often displayed in museums and textbooks, “small c” culture is lived and performed daily, shaping social identity through mundane practices.

A parallel distinction is found in Hall’s (1997) categorization of “Surface culture” and “Deep culture.” Surface culture represents those visible and sensory aspects, such as food, clothing, music, and festivals, that can be readily observed and even commodified. These are dynamic

and subject to change, reflecting temporal shifts in taste and technology. Deep culture, on the other hand, is embedded in values, thought patterns, communication styles, and social norms. It governs how individuals perceive relationships, authority, and morality. While “surface culture” may dazzle the senses, “deep culture” penetrates the psyche, and it is the invisible force that sustains the collective soul of a community.

Peterson (2004) expands upon this by associating “Big C” culture with “grand themes” which includes the geography, history, literature, politics, and intellectual heritage of a society, whereas “little c” culture revolves around the “common, minor themes” of daily existence such as fashion, body language, food preferences, and social hobbies (as cited in Lee, 2009; Nisargandha, 2019). These distinctions do not signify hierarchy but rather complementarity: together, they form the total ecology of cultural experience.

Building on these foundations, Chen (2004, as cited in Liu, 2013) proposed a comprehensive framework inspired by Lessard-Clouston (1996), categorizing cultural themes into seven “Big C” domains like music, social norms, education, economics, politics, history, and geography, and nine “small c” dimensions includes everyday routines,

greetings, gestures, holidays, and values. This model emphasizes that both macro and micro aspects are essential for understanding how culture operates as a dynamic system of meaning.

Lee (2009, as cited in Liu, 2013; Nisargandha, 2019) further refined this distinction, defining “Big C” culture as a collection of concrete, observable facts, symbols, festivals, art forms, educational systems, and customs, while “small c” culture embodies abstract socio-cultural ideals like attitudes, norms, and worldviews that vary according to gender, age, and class. Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that “Big C” culture represents the visible edifice of civilization, while “small c” culture constitutes its invisible foundation. The former captures the monumental, the latter the habitual; yet both are indispensable for a holistic comprehension of human societies.

Culture as Continuity and Change

From these scholarly explorations emerges a profound realization: culture exists simultaneously as spectacle and spirit, as ritual and rhythm. It is both seen and unseen, performed in public celebrations and whispered in private conversations. The visible manifestations may evolve with time, yet the underlying values persist, adapting subtly to new realities while maintaining continuity with the past. To

study culture, therefore, is to trace the dialogue between permanence and transformation, visibility and invisibility, the grand and the ordinary.

As societies become increasingly interconnected, understanding these dual layers of culture becomes vital. Language teaching, intercultural communication, and global citizenship education all demand sensitivity to both “Big C” and “small c” dimensions. True cultural competence, as Hall (1997) and Peterson (2004) remind us, is not about mastering external forms alone but about perceiving the invisible logics that shape how people think, feel, and interact. Culture is, ultimately, the mirror through which humanity sees itself, not merely a collection of traditions, but the living expression of shared meanings across time and space.

The Proposed Categorization of Themes under “Big C” and “small c” Culture

The discourse on cultural categorization has undergone significant evolution over the decades, shaped by the perspectives of scholars such as Brooks (1968), Hall (1976), Chen (2004), Peterson (2004), and Lee (2009). Each of these theorists, while differing in emphasis and context, emphasizes the multiplicity and dynamism of cultural expressions across regions, belief systems, and value frameworks. Their collective insights expose that culture is

not a monolithic construct but a constellation of visible and invisible dimensions that interact in nuanced and often complex ways.

Building on this intellectual lineage, the present book advances a categorization of cultural themes under the conceptual binaries of “Big C” and “small c” culture. This distinction acknowledges that while certain elements of culture are tangible and overt, manifesting in historical artifacts, institutions, and art, others remain embedded within the subtler domains of human interaction, behavior, and worldview.

Typologies: “Big C” and “small c” Culture

“Big C” culture refers to the observable, tangible, and institutionally codified aspects of culture and the components that are *easily perceived, experienced, or measured* in everyday life. These include artifacts of material culture like architecture, festivals, art, clothing, cuisine, and other socio-cultural practices that can be seen, touched, or performed. Such expressions embody the public and formal dimensions of a society’s identity and are often associated with its historical or canonical heritage.

In contrast, “small c” culture represents the *subtle, intangible, and internalized* dimensions of human experience, those that cannot be directly observed but are

nevertheless deeply felt. These include attitudes, emotions, ideologies, values, and modes of thought that shape interpersonal behavior and social interaction. Unlike “Big C,” which manifests through external symbols and institutional structures, “small c” is inscribed within the psyche and lived sensibilities of individuals, exposing itself through everyday gestures, communication patterns, and worldviews.

Cultural manifestations differ markedly across societies, reflecting the diversity of regional, linguistic, and religious identities as well as variations in social hierarchy and historical experience. Consequently, the parameters defining “Big C” and “small c” cultures are neither universal nor static; rather, they shift subtly from one context to another. Recognizing this fluidity, the present book proposes a contextual categorization of cultural elements into these two broad types, based primarily on their accessibility and visibility.

Through this twofold lens, the book does not merely differentiate between the *seen* and the *unseen* but seeks to unveil how both are inextricably interwoven and how the tangible objects of life embody intangible meanings, and how emotions and ideologies, in turn, give rise to material and aesthetic forms.

The categorization table of “Big C” and “small c” elements, reproduced in the subsequent section, thus serves as a conceptual map for tracing how visible artifacts and invisible values intertwine to construct the cultural imagination within the selected letters. This conceptual bifurcation not only synthesizes the contributions of earlier cultural theorists but also provides a pragmatic framework for contemporary intercultural analysis, pedagogy, and communication. It invites scholars and educators to engage with culture holistically, recognizing both its monumental expressions and its everyday manifestations as equally vital in constructing the human experience.

Table1: The proposed categorization of themes under “Big C” and “small c” culture

No./ Section	“Big C”	“small c”
1.	Religious Rituals	Non-verbal communication
2.	Festivals	Manners and Mannerisms
3.	Clothing and appearance	Leisure activities

4.	Art, literature, Music	Daily routines
5.	Geography/	Role of gender
6.	Sports	Values and belief systems
7.	Environment	Attitudes and Feelings
8.	Food	
9.	Science and Technology	
10.	Socio-economic conditions	
11.	Historical monuments	
12.	Social customs	
13.	Names of people and places	

The above-proposed categorization of the “Big C” and “small c” culture plays a significant role in distinguishing each theme in the book and helps in understanding the significance of the themes.

Vocabulary and Cultural Representation

Tagore's letters exhibit a fascinating fusion of formal and informal vocabulary, reflective of their personal and affective nature. Addressed primarily to family members, friends, and close associates, these letters capture the rhythms of daily life, which includes the routines, relationships, and reflections that define both the individual and the collective. Within their linguistic fabric lies a vivid portrayal of nineteenth-century Bengal, encompassing its social customs, attire, rituals, occupations, faith practices, and aesthetic sensibilities.

The letters frequently blur the distinction between the private and the public, and between personal experience and cultural narrative. Through the deliberate use of both formal and informal lexicon, Tagore bridges the gap between elite discourse and vernacular consciousness, providing a holistic view of Bengali culture in transition. His lexical choices often carry local resonance, embedding in English expressions the semantic flavor of Bengali life, including its idioms, metaphors, and emotional textures.

Consequently, the vocabulary tool not only serves as a linguistic instrument but as a cultural diagnostic device, uncovering how Tagore's language performs the dual function of self-expression and cultural preservation.

Through Tagore's words, the letters emerge as microcosms of local culture, where formal and informal vocabularies coalesce to evoke a Bengal that is at once deeply rooted and cosmopolitan, personal and universal.

The present book draws its primary data from the volume *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. The corpus consists of twenty-three letters penned by Tagore during the formative two decades of his literary career, years that mark his transition from youthful introspection to mature artistic consciousness. These letters, written in the intimate tone of personal correspondence, provide a vivid insight into Tagore's evolving thought, aesthetics, and emotional landscape.

The book adopted a manual analytical approach, reading and re-reading each letter with meticulous attention to linguistic and cultural detail. Employing a vocabulary tool as a preliminary instrument of lexical observation, the monograph focused on identifying key words, idioms, and expressions that foregrounded cultural specificities. This vocabulary-based reading was then situated within the framework of local culture, interpreted through the twin conceptual lenses of "Big C" and "small c" culture. While the former encompasses grand civilizational elements,

including art, literature, institutions, and intellectual traditions, and the latter engages with the subtler, quotidian expressions of culture, such as manners, beliefs, and patterns of everyday life. Through this layered approach, the book highlighted how Tagore's linguistic choices embody the local cultural consciousness of Bengal, even as they engage with global and colonial influences.

Chapter III

Local Cultural Expressions in Tagore's Letters

The letters traverse a spectrum of themes, including love and affection for home, Indo-British cultural encounters, naturalism, socialism, political reflections, religious and ritualistic practices, and social attitudes. As much as Tagore was a cosmopolitan thinker, deeply attuned to universal humanism, his writings display an equally passionate attachment to his local landscape, which includes its people, dialects, festivals, and natural surroundings. His epistolary narratives oscillate between the intimate and the ideological, portraying an artist who viewed the local not as an insular category but as the foundation of universal human experience (Sen, 2005).

The Local as a Site of Cultural Meaning

The central aim of this monograph is to explore how Tagore's letters function as cultural texts, articulating the local identity of late nineteenth-century Bengal. The analysis draws upon James Paul Gee's "vocabulary tool" (Gee, 2014) to examine how Tagore's use of language embodies two interrelated cultural dimensions: the "Big C" culture, referring to institutional, literary, and philosophical articulations of culture, and the "small c" culture,

encompassing everyday practices, gestures, and social conventions. Through this dual framework, the book seeks to illuminate how Tagore's letters synthesize the monumental and the mundane, the universal and the provincial, the intellectual and the emotive.

Tagore's letters offer a microcosmic view of Bengal's cultural modernity, which Partha Chatterjee (1993) characterizes as "the nationalist project of inner reform." Tagore's correspondence aligns with this project by mirroring a revaluation of indigenous culture amidst the colonial presence. His writings do not reject the modern altogether but attempt to vernacularize modernity, and that is, to adapt it within the ethical and aesthetic idioms of Bengal's local culture.

Localization, in Tagore's worldview, was not merely a spatial condition but an affective geography and a mode of belonging rooted in the soil, people, and natural environment of Bengal. His letters, often written from rural settings such as Santiniketan, Shilaidaha, and Patisar, evoke a sensuous intimacy with the landscape. They reveal a dialogic relation between the self and the surrounding ecology, anticipating his later philosophical articulation of the human-nature continuum in *Sadhana* (1913) and *The Religion of Man* (1931).

In this sense, localization becomes an ethical practice, a recognition that identity is inseparable from one's immediate environment. As Amartya Sen (2005) notes, Tagore's humanism "was rooted in a profound local consciousness," enabling him to speak of the universal without forsaking the particular. The letters express this sentiment vividly; his depictions of rivers, rains, rural labor, and village festivals are intertwined with moral and aesthetic reflection, forming what could be termed a poetics of locality.

A striking feature of Tagore's letters is his use of linguistic hybridity, a subtle commentary on colonial cultural ambivalence. His use of reduplicative and hybrid expressions such as *ingabanga*, a term combining *inga* (English) and *banga* (Bengali), captures the psychological and cultural tensions of his time. The term humorously but critically encapsulates the Bengali elite's imitation of British manners, their awkward negotiation between colonial prestige and indigenous authenticity.

In deploying such expressions, Tagore anticipates what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) would later describe as the "mimicry of modernity", where colonial subjects reproduce the colonizer's culture but never entirely become it. Through *ingabanga*, Tagore transforms a colloquial expression into a

semiotic marker of postcolonial ambivalence, embodying the friction between *assimilation* and *resistance*. His letters thus become a linguistic laboratory in which he experiments with cultural irony, code-switching, and bilingual play, all of which mirror the sociolinguistic hybridity of colonial Bengal (Das, 1996).

Tagore's reflections on home and domestic life disclose an intimate sociology of the Bengali household, shaped by affection, duty, and aesthetic sensibility. The home, in his letters, is not a static enclosure but a symbolic space of renewal where private emotions intersect with collective cultural values. His concern with ritual, kinship, and familial ties extends beyond sentimentality; it reflects a cultural anthropology of everyday life, in which domestic practices are repositories of moral and spiritual knowledge.

Nature, too, assumes a moral agency in these letters. Rivers, trees, rains, and birds are personified not as decorative images but as metaphors for cultural vitality and continuity. In this sense, Tagore's letters participate in what Ashis Nandy (1983) calls "the intimate enemy" dialectic and his way of reclaiming emotional and moral depth from a colonial modernity obsessed with rational order.

Representation of Cultural Hierarchies and Regional Identity

Local identity constitutes a vital dimension of culture, encompassing the everyday practices, beliefs, values, and understandings particular to a place and its people. Culture functions as a medium through which communities articulate a sense of belonging, and simultaneously, a lens through which outsiders perceive them. In the letters of Tagore, this dynamic is particularly visible in his depiction of the regional identity of the Bengali people. The letters, beyond their personal and anecdotal content, operate as a repository of social commentary, revealing the interplay between selfhood, community, and cultural location.

One early instance illustrating this is Tagore's description of Bengali travellers arriving in England: "By and by the ship arrives and docks at Southampton. The Bengali passengers have reached the shores of England. They set off for London" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 8, L. No. 1). The phrase "Bengali passengers" immediately establishes a distinct local identity, one inseparable from the place of origin and the socio-cultural realities it embodies. Tagore reinforces this identity through repetition:

★ "For the first few days, 'Bengalis' find themselves embarrassed to sit on a chair or stool..." (Dutta and Robinson, p. 8, L. No. 1)

★ “Spent a few days making fun of ‘Bengali’ ignorance...” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 9, L. No. 1)

Through these textual markers, Tagore presents the Bengali travellers as ordinary individuals confronting unfamiliar circumstances. Their embarrassment, confusion, and apparent ignorance are not mere personal traits; they emerge as reflections of the cultural gap between colonial India and metropolitan England. The use of third-person pronouns like ‘they’ and ‘Bengali passengers’ creates both narrative distance and analytical perspective, highlighting Tagore’s role as an observer and chronicler of regional identity in transit. This deliberate separation signals his cosmopolitan orientation and social positioning: he simultaneously belongs to and transcends the Bengali community he describes.

The letters also disclose the comparative dimension of identity negotiation, where Bengali self-perception is constructed in relation to English norms, etiquette, and lifestyle. The repeated references to discomfort and social awkwardness emphasize how regional identity is fragile yet performative in transnational contexts. Here, identity is not fixed but contingent upon situational, cultural, and hierarchical parameters. Tagore’s letters suggest that local identity, while deeply rooted, is continuously reshaped when

confronted with the expectations of a global or colonial environment.

The exploration of regional identity extends beyond the Bengali context to other Indian communities. The repeated invocation of the term *Bihari babu*, referring to acquaintances from Bihar, illustrates the specificity of regional identification:

- ★ “When Bihari babu and ... magistrate of Puri...their evident keenness” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 34, L. No. 17)
- ★ “Bihari babu and Mrs Gupta were flabbergasted” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 34, L. No. 17)
- ★ “Bihari babu and wife were now livid” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 34, L. No. 17)
- ★ “In addition to mortifying Bihari babu” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 35, L. No. 17)

Here, the label *Bihari babu* functions both as a marker of intimacy and a subtle critique, humanizing the subject while pointing to perceived regional peculiarities. Notably, the letters do not address individuals by their

personal names, but by their geographical or cultural affiliation, signaling the embedded hierarchies of social recognition. This practice implicitly reflects the politics of place, where identity is inextricably linked to regional origin and, by extension, to social positioning within the broader colonial landscape.

Critically, Tagore's treatment of regional identity illuminates broader questions of cultural mobility and colonial modernity. The Bengali travellers' experiences in England, as recorded in the letters, exemplify the tensions inherent in crossing both physical and cultural borders. Their discomfort, linguistic hesitations, and social embarrassment epitomize the asymmetry of power and knowledge between the colonized and the colonizer, unveiling the mechanisms through which local identity is both asserted and constrained in diasporic or transnational encounters. In this sense, letters operate as a reflective lens on colonial-era mobility, demonstrating how identity negotiation is contingent upon spatial, cultural, and temporal coordinates.

Simultaneously, Tagore's letters highlight his humanist commitment to acknowledging the plurality of identities. Despite his internationalist outlook and cosmopolitan sensibilities, he remains attentive to local distinctiveness, documenting regional differences with a

blend of empathy, humor, and critical observation. By foregrounding the specificity of *Bengali* and *Bihari* identities, the letters challenge homogenizing narratives of Indian culture, asserting the significance of localities in shaping social experience and consciousness. In doing so, they exemplify the interplay between the particular and the universal, illustrating how regional identity, far from being a static cultural marker, is a site of negotiation, reflection, and representation. Tagore's epistolary accounts highlight the interconnections between locality, culture, and mobility. The letters reveal that identity is neither monolithic nor merely performative; it is a complex construct shaped by place, social expectation, and cross-cultural perception. They highlight how regional consciousness informs both personal experience and collective belonging, providing a critical lens through which to examine the intersections of local identity, cultural hierarchy, and cosmopolitan engagement in colonial India.

In the letters, language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a mirror reflecting social hierarchies, cultural consciousness, and regional sensibilities of late nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. The recurrence of particular lexical choices, especially those denoting social respectability, presents Tagore's awareness of the cultural

stratifications embedded in everyday discourse. His repeated use of the term *sahib* in reference to the Englishmen in India encapsulates the intersection of reverence and colonial subordination that characterized the social fabric of his time.

Tagore's correspondence offers a fascinating glimpse into this linguistic politeness. For instance, he writes, "I ... 'sahib', to go out pig-sticking in this weather will not work" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 16, L. No. 5), and again, "Even though you are a strapping sahiblet" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 16, L. No. 5), followed by, "I shake the sahib's hand" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 16, L. No. 5). These expressions, while superficially courteous, are deeply layered with irony, humor, and self-awareness. They simultaneously recognize the authority of the colonial *sahib* and disclose Tagore's ability to humanize and domesticate that authority through wit and playful familiarity.

No other corpus of Tagore's writings so vividly captures his breadth of curiosity and his naturalistic wit as these letters. Through his epistolary reflections, Tagore exposes the textures of daily life, his encounters with the colonial elite, and his own self-reflexive humor as a Bengali intellectual navigating the colonial encounter. One particularly striking episode involves a young *sahib* officer who arrives during a storm for an unintended visit, creating

a scene of comic incongruity that highlights both Tagore's sense of irony and his insight into the absurdities of colonial social ritual.

Beneath this surface of geniality, however, Tagore's letters are deeply invested in articulating a Bengali cultural identity. This identity operates on two intertwined levels, which can be termed as "Big C" and "small c" culture. The "Big C" culture refers to the visible, institutional, and collective aspects of regional identity such as language, class, and the recognisable social position of the *Bengali babu* and the *Bihari babu*. These identities are culturally codified and socially legible, reflecting the broader visibility and social accessibility of the people of these regions. The letters, in this sense, become a cultural archive, mapping how *Bengalis* and *Biharis* were perceived, represented, and interacted with in the colonial milieu. Alongside this, Tagore's letters also reveal that the presence of "small c" culture includes the subtle, everyday practices, passions, and behavioral manners that constitute lived experience. Here, cultural life manifests in the shared passions for pursuits like *shikar* (hunting), or in the gestures of deference like addressing Englishmen as *sahib* or *sahiblet*. These micro-level practices offer intimate glimpses into how colonial

power dynamics infiltrated the everyday rhythms of social life.

The intersection of “Big C” and “small c” culture in Tagore’s correspondence creates a picture of cultural overlap and interdependence. For example, while the regional identities of the *Bengali* and *Bihari babu* belong to the domain of “Big C” culture due to their social visibility, they also partake in “small c” culture through shared mannerisms, linguistic courtesy, and behavioral conventions. This overlapping unveils Tagore’s perceptive understanding of culture as a fluid continuum rather than a fixed binary. Thus, Tagore’s letters emerge as a site where linguistic politeness, regional pride, and colonial consciousness converge. They invite readers to perceive culture not merely as an abstract system but as a living practice and one negotiated through words, gestures, and humor in the complex theater of colonial modernity.

In the corpus of Tagore’s letters, one encounters a portrayal of the socio-cultural dynamics that shaped the Indian subcontinent before independence. The parallel positioning of the *Bengali* and *Bihari* communities, both linguistically and culturally akin, becomes a focal point through which Tagore subtly illuminates the complexities of social hierarchy and identity in colonial India. His linguistic

choices, particularly the recurrent invocation of regional identifiers such as *Bengali* and *Bihari*, serve as markers of cultural proximity and shared marginalization within a colonial framework.

Simultaneously, the lexicon of colonial privilege embodied in words like *sahib* and *memsahib* unveils an entrenched asymmetry in social positioning. These terms, saturated with the authority and prestige of the ruling class, stand in stark contrast to the more localized, culturally grounded identifiers of the indigenous people. Even when residing within the same geographical space, the British retained an exclusive symbolic capital that elevated them above the native populace. Tagore's diction, thus, emphasizes a sharp social distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, situating linguistic representation as a site of both hierarchy and resistance.

What becomes apparent in these letters is Tagore's deliberate attempt to foreground the individuality of regional identities, including the *Bengali* and the *Bihari*, within the broader discourse of colonial modernity. His portrayal of the *Bihari babu* as energetic and passionate, yet socially insecure in comparison to his Bengali counterpart, captures an intricate spectrum of identity consciousness and self-perception. The tension between enthusiasm and inferiority

becomes emblematic of a larger struggle for dignity within the colonial social order.

Moreover, Tagore's linguistic sensibility is profoundly rooted in the local. His use of informal and vernacular expressions reflects a conscious engagement with everyday speech and social realism. The juxtaposition of colloquial vocabulary such as *Bengali* and *Bihari* with hierarchical colonial titles like *sahib* reveals not only the multiplicity of Indian social identities but also Tagore's awareness of the performative power of language. By weaving these terms seamlessly into his letters, he transforms them into a cultural register that reflects the lived experience of a colonized society.

In this light, Tagore's correspondence transcends mere communication; it becomes a cultural document where linguistic choice articulates the politics of belonging and exclusion. The letters, infused with the rhythms of local speech, testify to his immersion in the vernacular milieu, where language becomes both a reflection of and a resistance to colonial hegemony. The regional affiliations of the *Bengali* and *Bihari* people, juxtaposed with the privileged position of the British, thus emerge as powerful indicators of Tagore's socio-linguistic consciousness and his subtle critique of colonial stratification.

Representation of Hindu Rituals and Local Cultural Vocabulary

The articulation of local culture often finds its most profound expression in the rituals and religious practices of a community. Within the context of rural Bengal, Hindu rituals serve not merely as expressions of devotion but as living embodiments of cultural continuity, social identity, and regional aesthetics. Rabindranath Tagore's personal letters from Shahzadpur offer an intimate glimpse into how local religiosity weaves itself into the social fabric of village life. His correspondence unveils a subtle yet perceptive ethnographic gaze that transforms the mundane details of rural worship into a study of the intersection between belief, creativity, and social behavior.

Tagore's references to Hindu deities such as *Lord Krishna*, *Kali*, *Radhe-Krishna*, *Madan*, and *Saraswati* are not mere devotional invocations; they serve as semiotic markers of the collective consciousness of the region. In one letter, he notes, "...the Munshif has all of a sudden perceived Lord Krishna..." (Dutta and Robinson, p.32, L. No. 16), while another evokes a vivid tableau of local worship: "On...Lord Shiva, on the next day Kali...Radhe-Krishna...Shahzadpur banyan tree" (Dutta and Robinson, p.32, L. No. 16). The recurrence of divine names signals how

the sacred saturates the rhythms of everyday life, collapsing the distance between the temporal and the transcendental.

Tagore's engagement with these ritualistic allusions transcends mere observation. Through figures such as the *Munshif*, a local priest and storyteller who, in Tagore's words, "makes the fictional story," and the letters reveal how mythology and local faith become intertwined within the performative imagination of the people. The *Munshif's* tales about "three gods under the banyan tree, including Lord Shiva, Kali, and Radhe-Krishna" encapsulate a syncretic blend of faith and folklore, demonstrating how narrative invention shapes ritual practice. As Tagore recounts, the *Munshif's* piety manifests not only through mythic narration but also through his acts of offering: "On days when offerings of sweet *kshir* and jackfruit are made to the goddess..." (Dutta and Robinson, 1997, p.32). Over time, such acts crystallized into communal practices, transforming individual devotion into collective tradition.

What is particularly striking in Tagore's depiction is his critique of what he perceives as blind religiosity among the rural populace. His letters oscillate between empathy and irony, and he admires the cultural vitality embedded in these customs, yet simultaneously observes how faith can slip into unreflective ritualism. Tagore's portrayal of the *Munshif* and

his devotees thus becomes a subtle commentary on the dialectic between enlightenment and superstition, between creative spirituality and habitual belief. His tone neither dismisses nor romanticizes the villagers' faith; rather, it frames religious life as a vital cultural text that unveils both the imaginative plenitude and the epistemic limitations of local consciousness.

From a broader perspective, these letters document the microcosm of Bengali religious life at the fin de siècle, a time when colonial modernity was redefining modes of thought and expression. Through his epistolary reflections, Tagore locates divinity not in the temple's sanctum but in the vernacular enactments of belief and in the banyan tree transformed into a shrine, in the improvised offerings of *kshir* and fruits, in the oral storytelling that sustains local mythologies. This merging of the sacred with the quotidian reflects Tagore's larger aesthetic and philosophical project: the search for the divine within the ordinary, for beauty and meaning within the cultural patterns of everyday existence.

In a deeper sense, Tagore's attention to ritual and local gods functions as a dialogic encounter between text and context. The invocation of deities such as *Saraswati*, the goddess of learning and art, embodies the creative continuum between religious symbolism and artistic

inspiration. When Tagore writes that something “sounds like a dictum personally dictated to him by the lips of the goddess Saraswati” (Dutta and Robinson, p.10, L. No. 1), he equates divine inspiration with the act of artistic creation itself. Here, devotion becomes a metaphor for the poetic process, a synthesis of cultural inheritance and individual imagination. Thus, the letters unveil how Tagore internalizes the idioms of rural religiosity to construct a vision of culture as lived experience. His portrayal of rituals, myths, and deities is not ethnographic detachment but empathetic reconstruction. In capturing the devotional pulse of the people of Shahzadpur, Tagore transforms the local into the universal, demonstrating that faith remains a fundamental mode of cultural expression. Through this epistolary ethnography, he reminds us that the essence of Bengal’s local culture lies not in dogma but in the creative interplay between belief, narrative, and everyday life.

Among the various linguistic and cultural references embedded in Rabindranath Tagore’s personal letters, certain expressions evoke the deep ritualistic consciousness of Hindu society, particularly those associated with post-death ceremonies. Vocabulary such as “bone ashes,” “Holy Ganga,” “blessed water,” and “offering of betel” discloses the intimate connection between language, belief, and ritual

practice. As reflected in the letters, “If someone dies... ashes to the Ganges, they powder a piece of bone from the funeral pyre and keep...the water of the sacred river” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 22, L. No. 8), and “To... an offering of betel, ...made his pilgrimage to the blessed water” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 22, L. No. 8). These lines encapsulate both the spiritual symbolism and the performative dimensions of Hindu death rituals.

The practice of cremating the deceased and immersing the ashes in the sacred waters of the Ganges constitutes one of the most enduring and egalitarian aspects of Hindu culture. Across class, gender, and regional distinctions, this ritual enacts the cyclical conception of life and death, wherein the sacred river functions as both purifier and liberator. The Ganga, personified as a divine mother, symbolizes spiritual transcendence, and its waters are believed to cleanse the mortal residue and guide the departed soul toward salvation. Tagore’s mention of these rites not only situates his narrative within a tangible cultural landscape but also exposes the metaphysical fabric of everyday life in colonial Bengal. Through such references, Tagore unveils his deep understanding of the interplay between ritual and social identity, suggesting that these

practices are not mere formalities but living expressions of collective belief.

Similarly, the reference to “Swayamvara of Indumati” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 33, L. No. 16) extends Tagore’s engagement with ritual beyond death to the sphere of life-cycle ceremonies, specifically marriage. The *Swayamvara*, a traditional form of choosing one’s spouse, represents a socio-cultural moment that merges personal agency with communal sanction. By juxtaposing rituals of death with those of union, Tagore traces the continuum of human experience that underlies the rhythms of Indian social life. His letters thus become an archive of cultural memory, where the quotidian and the sacred coexist seamlessly.

Notably, Tagore often employs a third-person narrative stance while describing these cultural phenomena. This narrative distancing allows him to maintain an ethnographic gaze, observing without overtly intruding, interpreting without moralizing. Such detachment, however, is not devoid of empathy; rather, it reflects Tagore’s awareness of the need to present cultural realities as they are lived, not as they are idealized. The result is a portrait of Bengal’s ritual life rendered with both affection and critical precision.

Tagore's use of indigenous vocabulary terms like '*namashkar*' and '*pranam*', further enhances the authenticity and rhythm of his cultural representation. As seen in his letter: "Then she is introduced by Sunanda to the princes one by one, and to each of them Indumati makes a courteous '*namashkar*', and pass on" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 33, L. No. 16); and again, "Had she not wiped away the stain of that fact with the humility of '*pranam*', the scene would have lost its grace" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 33, L. No. 16). Here, *namashkar* signifies a gesture of salutation, while *pranam* embodies reverence and humility. The adjectives "courteous" and "humility" emphasize not merely politeness but a deeper cultural ethos rooted in respect, grace, and interpersonal harmony. Through these linguistic markers, Tagore provides a window into the social psychology of Bengal and its codes of decorum, modes of address, and hierarchies of respect. His deliberate use of native vocabulary serves as both linguistic preservation and cultural assertion. It resists the homogenizing tendencies of colonial discourse and celebrates the nuances of *Bengali* social conduct.

What becomes apparent throughout these letters is Tagore's deep empathy for ordinary people and his sensitivity to the moral and emotional architecture of their

lives. His reflections on ritual, whether concerning the sanctity of the Ganges, the symbolic offering of betel, or the reverent act of greeting, unveil a worldview grounded in spiritual inclusivity and cultural continuity. The letters thus transcend personal correspondence; they evolve into ethnographic narratives that record the lived traditions of Bengal's society with remarkable subtlety. In tracing these motifs, Tagore not only illuminates the ritualistic vocabulary of his time but also frames it as a discourse of identity formation. The recurrent presence of these cultural signifiers emphasizes his belief that social rituals are repositories of collective meaning and sites where memory, faith, and identity converge. His letters, therefore, stand as both literary artifacts and sociocultural documents, chronicling how language functions as the vessel through which the local becomes universal and the personal becomes historical.

The dynamics of *local culture* within the sphere of religion and ritual have been examined through the conceptual lens of the “Big C” and “small c” culture, as proposed in Table 1. The “Big C” culture encompasses the grand, institutional, and visibly recognizable aspects of civilization: religion, art, history, and tradition, while the “small c” culture reflects the subtle details of everyday life, including attitudes, gestures, and modes of interpersonal

interaction. Tagore's letters offer an exceptional field for tracing both these dimensions within the socio-religious fabric of nineteenth-century Bengal.

The "Big C" culture is particularly manifested through Tagore's references to Hindu religious rituals and deities that dominate the collective consciousness of the people. The invocation of divine figures such as *Lord Shiva*, *Kali*, *Radha-Krishna*, *Madan*, and *Saraswati* situates the text within the broader spiritual and cultural matrix of Bengal. These figures, represented through idols and iconography, transcend the individual and mark the visible expressions of communal belief. Similarly, ritualistic practices such as the immersion of *bone ashes*, the sanctity of the *Holy Ganga*, the use of *blessed water*, the *offering of betel*, and the ceremonial *Swayamvara* signify elements of "Big C" culture, where collective religious observance becomes an instrument of cultural continuity. Whereas the "small c" culture surfaces in the minutiae of Tagore's linguistic choices that encapsulate the behavioral ethos of everyday Bengali life. Words such as *namashkar* and *pranam* signify courtesy, humility, and social grace, reflecting the embedded cultural codes of respect and greeting in the Bengali milieu. These lexical items are not mere communicative acts; they articulate the moral temperament and aesthetic sensibility of

an entire community. Through such subtle linguistic inclusions, Tagore captures the living pulse of a culture that resides not only in its temples and rituals but also in the quiet civility of its people.

A compelling dimension emerges when one observes the *intersections* and *overlaps* between the “Big C” and “small c” cultures. The same divine entities include *Shiva*, *Kali*, *Radha-Krishna*, *Madan*, and *Saraswati* that belong to the grand domain of “Big C” culture also permeate the intimate, faith-based experiences of individuals, thereby entering the domain of “small c” culture. The idols embody the visible and tangible expression of faith, while the belief itself, deeply internalized and enacted in daily life, represents an intangible, lived experience. This intersection unveils Tagore’s understanding of culture as an organic continuum rather than a rigid categorization.

In several letters, Tagore’s attention to post-death rituals reflected through terms such as *bone ashes*, *Holy Ganga*, *blessed water*, and *offering of betel* emphasizes his engagement with the rituals that define both the temporality and spirituality of Bengali existence. Such references do not merely describe religious practices but rather evoke a sense of cultural rootedness that binds the personal with the collective, the temporal with the sacred. Through this

lexicon, Tagore provides a textured portrayal of Bengali culture, simultaneously local in its specificity and universal in its resonance. Furthermore, by incorporating traditional matrimonial customs like *Swayamvara*, Tagore situates his letters within the broader socio-cultural ethos of pre-Independence Bengal. The mention of deities and ritual offerings *sweet kshir* and *jackfruit*, serves as a symbolic bridge connecting divine devotion with the quotidian rhythms of Bengali domestic life. In these expressions, faith and festivity coexist, revealing the intricate web of belief that sustains the community's moral and spiritual imagination.

Tagore's linguistic precision further extends to formal expressions of respect, particularly through the recurrent use of *pranam* and *namashkar*. These salutations, deeply embedded in Indian communicative culture, encapsulate the ethics of humility and reverence that define interpersonal relations in the subcontinent. In presenting these cultural markers, Tagore not only documents the lived realities of Bengal but also projects an image of India's civilizational unity before a global readership. Thus, his letters emerge as cultural texts that preserve the spiritual and social essence of a time, where religion and ritual serve as vital signifiers of both identity and continuity.

Tagore's Lexicon of the Local: The Poetics of Household Culture and Emotional Topography

The representation of local culture in Tagore's letters often emerges through the subtle, almost tactile evocation of domestic spaces and rural household elements. Home, as an intimate microcosm of cultural expression, becomes a vital site through which the textures of Bengal's local life can be discerned. In Tagore's personal correspondence, one encounters a careful orchestration of rustic imagery through '*wicker mat*', '*hookah*', '*board games*', '*cows lying in the courtyard*', '*cow dung cake*', and '*verandah*', each serving as a semiotic signifier of the socio-cultural fabric of nineteenth-century Bengal.

In one letter, the sensory immediacy of Tagore's description draws the reader directly into the Bengali rural world: "Bengalis... damp, ...hookahs... their... a cow lies tethered in the courtyard that has walls plastered in cow-dung cake and wet washing hangs drying over a verandah" (Dutta and Robinson, p.9, L.No.1). Elsewhere, the *verandah* becomes not merely a domestic architectural feature but a social and administrative threshold: "The magistrate was sitting in the verandah of his tent dispensing justice, flanked by a constable" (Dutta and Robinson, p.16, L.No.5). These evocative details, scattered across Tagore's letters,

crystallize the ethos of Bengal's rural household spaces that were both lived-in and symbolically resonant. The *verandah* and *courtyard*, recurrent motifs in these letters, act as liminal zones between the private and the public, reflecting both social hierarchies and quotidian rhythms. The *verandah*, for instance, functions as a social platform where men engage in leisurely discussions or conduct informal transactions, thereby embodying the confluence of domestic familiarity and civic interaction.

Similarly, the *courtyard*, a central feature of the traditional Bengali home signifies both economic standing and communal belonging. It is in the courtyard that animals rest, children play, and daily life unfolds in full visibility, enacting the performative intimacy of the rural household. The image of '*cows lying in the courtyard*' or '*walls plastered with cow-dung cakes*' captures not just a picturesque rural aesthetic but also the embeddedness of agrarian culture within the domestic sphere. The cow-dung cake, molded by hand and used as fuel for cooking, becomes a humble emblem of self-sufficiency, ecological balance, and the cyclical continuity of village life.

Moreover, Tagore's reference to *board games* introduces a dimension of recreation and social bonding, suggesting that even in the simplicity of rural existence,

leisure was a valued form of cultural expression. Such details emphasize the intersection of material life and affective experience, situating the household as a living archive of tradition and continuity. The *hookah*, on the other hand, operates as a marker of generational leisure and cross-cultural influence which is an inherited pastime of Persian origin assimilated into Bengali domestic life, symbolizing both colonial cosmopolitanism and indigenous adaptation.

The layered imagery in these letters thus transcends mere ethnographic observation. It unveils a consciousness deeply rooted in the rhythms of local life and yet reflective of broader cultural negotiations. Tagore's attention to such minute details does not arise from anthropological curiosity alone but from an emotional and aesthetic intimacy with the land and its people. His lexicon of the rural home, infused with affection and familiarity, articulates a profound attachment to Bengal's soil, a nostalgia that anticipates his later poetic meditations on belonging and place.

In this sense, the rustic household in Tagore's correspondence is not a static backdrop but an active metaphor for cultural identity. Through these seemingly simple references, Tagore inscribes a philosophy of locality where the ordinary becomes emblematic of the collective spirit. The *verandah* (courtyard), the *hookah*, and the cow-

ding cakes together compose a lived topography of Bengal's local culture, at once tangible and transcendent, material and metaphorical.

Thus, the letters illuminate how domestic imagery operates as a form of cultural narration. Tagore's depiction of everyday rural life constructs a discourse of intimacy that blurs the boundaries between the personal and the ethnographic. It is through these humble yet potent household elements that the poet's engagement with the local becomes legible and a vision of Bengal that is both grounded in reality and suffused with lyricism, unveiling the rustic household as the very heart of his cultural imagination.

Beyond the broader thematic dimensions of Tagore's correspondence, a distinct register of domestic vocabulary emerges, one that vividly captures the textures of everyday Bengali life. Through his letters, Tagore not only communicates personal sentiment but also constructs an ethnographic sketch of a culture grounded in the ordinary. The lexical choices like 'quilt', 'oil-smeared pillow', 'a grimy mat', 'a bit of hessian', 'a layer of dirt', 'old zinc pot', 'old glasses', 'an oil lamp', and 'a sooty lamp stand' compose a subtle yet profound portrait of the material world inhabited by rural Bengal. In one such letter, Tagore writes: "Littering... quilt, oil-smeared pillow, a grimy mat, a bit of

hessian... a layer of dirt... old zinc pot, some bottles and old glasses, bits of glass... an oil lamp, a sooty lamp stand” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 16, L.No.5). The accumulation of these images, unembellished and tactile, does not merely catalog objects; it recreates a sensory landscape. The domestic artifacts, though mundane, acquire symbolic significance in Tagore’s portrayal of the local. The “oil-smearred pillow” and the “grimy mat” are not expressions of poverty alone but indicators of lived experience and objects that bear the imprint of human intimacy and toil. The “old zinc pot” and “sooty lamp stand” evoke a time-worn resilience, reflecting a society where simplicity and endurance coexist.

Such vocabulary reflects the socio-economic stratification of the Bengal Tagore observed. The adjectives like ‘littering’, ‘oil-smearred’, ‘grimy’, and ‘sooty’ encode not just the material state of domesticity but also its social condition. Dirt here becomes a semiotic marker of class, indexing both deprivation and authenticity. In contrast to the sanitized depictions of colonial modernity, Tagore’s letters reassert the vitality of rural life through its imperfections. The linguistic economy of these words performs what may be called a cultural poetics of the household, a mode through which the aesthetic and the anthropological intertwine. In

this sense, Tagore's letters may be read as micro-narratives of belonging, articulating a localized Bengali identity through the ordinary and the domestic. His representation of the "layer of dirt" and "sooty lamp stand" transcends the descriptive, assuming an affective quality that binds the writer emotionally to his environment. It is within this apparent simplicity that the depth of Tagore's cultural imagination lies. The household, in his writing, becomes both a literal and metaphorical space symbolizing warmth, intimacy, and rootedness within a rapidly modernizing colonial world.

Equally significant is the emotional texture of Tagore's language of displacement, particularly in his letters written during his voyage to England. The recurring vocabulary: 'homesick' and 'seasick', unveils the oscillation between attachment and estrangement. He writes:

- ★ "I cannot tell you how 'seasick' I have been this time." (Dutta and Robinson, p. 19, L.No.6)
- ★ "...I distinctly felt myself leave my body and go to 'Jorasanko'." (p. 19, L.No.6)
- ★ "Nowadays I feel that there is 'no place like home'." (p. 19, L.No.6)
- ★ "... 'The sea' is pretty calm, the ship hardly rolls..." (p. 19, L. No.6)

Here, the juxtaposition of ‘homesick’ and ‘seasick’ is particularly revealing. While the former encapsulates a psychological yearning for home and cultural rootedness, the latter signifies a physical unease caused by motion and distance. The contradiction between these two states encapsulates Tagore’s dual consciousness and his simultaneous fascination with the unknown and his longing for the familiar. His reference to *Jorasanko*, the family mansion in Calcutta, functions as an emotional anchor, a spatial metaphor for identity and belonging.

The calmness of the sea, described as “pretty calm” and causing the ship to “hardly roll”, contrasts sharply with his internal turbulence. The sea, vast and indifferent, mirrors the existential loneliness of the traveler who is both a participant in and an observer of modernity. The tension between movement and stillness, sea and home, foreignness and familiarity, becomes a central motif in these letters.

Through this linguistic interplay, Tagore transforms personal correspondence into a literary cartography of emotion. His descriptions of household objects and the emotional vocabulary of exile together construct a dialectic between material domesticity and psychological displacement. The minutiae of rural household life, like the ‘quilt and ‘lamp stand’, and the metaphors of travel through

the ‘sea’ and ‘ship’, together delineate Tagore’s broader humanism: a vision rooted in home yet open to the world. Thus, these letters highlight that for Tagore, home is not merely a physical space but a moral and imaginative geography. His attachment to Bengali domestic culture, expressed through objects and idioms of simplicity, represents his resistance to the alienation of colonial modernity. The domestic lexicon embedded within his prose thus becomes a repository of collective memory and an affirmation of local identity. Tagore’s letters, therefore, stand not merely as records of personal sentiment but as textual sites where culture, emotion, and geography coalesce into a distinctly Bengali modernity.

The rustic household, as represented in Tagore’s letters, embodies a rich cultural semiotics that oscillates between what scholars often term the “Big C” and the “small c” cultures. Through an intricate interplay of language and imagery, Tagore not only rebuilds the material lifeworld of Bengal but also exposes the affective and emotional dimensions that sustain it.

The “Big C” culture, as discernible in the letters, encapsulates the tangible and visible cultural artifacts of domestic life through *the wicker mat, the hookah, the board games, cows lying in the courtyard, cow-dung cakes, the*

verandah, the oil-smearred walls, the grimy interiors, and the ubiquitous layer of dirt that marks the lived reality of a rural household. These objects and descriptions are not merely ornamental details; rather, they stand as cultural signifiers that anchor the letters within a specific sociocultural milieu. Tagore's meticulous observation of such household elements situates the everyday life of Bengal within a broader ethnographic and civilizational narrative.

In contrast, the "small c" culture, which operates on a more affective and interpersonal plane, finds expression in the writer's emotional attachment to home. The recurring vocabulary like *homesick, seasick, pretty calm, and hookah*, reveals Tagore's oscillation between absence and belonging, mobility and rootedness. Interestingly, the *hookah*, while commonly situated within the domain of "Big C" culture as a household article, also assumes a "small c" dimension. It becomes a cultural metaphor for intimacy, trust, and social bonding; withholding it from someone, as the letters suggest, could be perceived as an act of exclusion or insult. The duality of the *hookah*, both a cultural artifact and an emotional symbol, demonstrates how the boundaries between "Big C" and "small c" cultures are porous and dialogic rather than fixed.

This overlap becomes particularly evident in references to *board games* and *hookah*, which, though ostensibly material objects, acquire symbolic significance as shared leisure activities within the community. They represent spaces of social interaction and cultural continuity that may not be immediately legible to non-local readers. Thus, within the letters, one discerns an organic fusion of the two cultural categories, where the tangible and the intangible, the object and the emotion, coexist seamlessly.

Moreover, Tagore's letters frequently highlight diverse household settings and domestic imagery through the *board games*, *cows lying in the courtyard*, *walls plastered with cow-dung cakes*, *verandah of his tent*, *wicker mat*, and *hookah*. These linguistic choices not only mirror the Bengali rural aesthetic but also broaden the cultural panorama to include the wider Indian ethos of the late nineteenth century. The use of the word *verandah* in the sentence, "the magistrate was sitting in the verandah of his tent dispensing justice, flanked by a constable" (p.16), illustrates the contemporary cultural texture of colonial Bengal. Here, Tagore imbues his correspondence with a distinctly local color, transforming the letter into both a personal document and a cultural archive.

Significantly, Tagore's representation of the domestic sphere resists the allure of aristocratic self-representation. Despite his elite background, he consciously foregrounds the quotidian culture of ordinary Bengali households. This deliberate focus on the common people and their homes, habits, and speech unveils his profound empathy and his desire to locate cultural authenticity in the everyday. The linguistic interweaving of Bengali expressions such as *Jal Khabo* or *Pani Pan Korbo* (I will drink water) further reinforces the writer's intimate engagement with his native tongue and cultural identity. Thus, Tagore's letters transcend mere personal correspondence; they evolve into ethnographic texts that document the coexistence of material culture and emotional consciousness. Through the dialectic of the "Big C" and "small c" cultures, Tagore constructs a vivid portrait of Bengal's rural world, one that is both sensorially rich and emotionally resonant. His discourse reveals not only the texture of the local but also a universal longing for belonging, continuity, and connection to one's homeland.

The Local Linguistic Imprint: Tagore's Letters and the Poetics of Everyday Expression

The representation of local culture in Rabindranath Tagore's personal letters is most intimately reflected through his

choice of language, especially the incorporation of indigenous Bengali words denoting seasons, kinship, places, and personal affection. The use of such vocabulary builds a linguistic and emotional landscape rooted in the soil of Bengal, rendering the letters not merely personal communications but cultural documents that mirror the living idiom of the time.

Tagore's lexical choices, like *Agrahayen*, *Magh*, *Shelidah*, *Jorasanko*, *Meja dada*, *didimani*, *Beli*, *Khoka*, and the affectionate expression *little wife*, act as markers of cultural intimacy. Each term embodies a microcosm of Bengali social life, evoking the rhythms, relationships, and affective nuances of Tagore's milieu. These instances, as seen in his correspondence, demonstrate how the everyday vocabulary of domestic and regional belonging is woven seamlessly into his epistolary narrative. For instance, in one of the early letters, Tagore writes, "Next Sunday, on the 24th of Agrahayan, at the auspicious hour, my closest relative Shriman Rabindranath Thakur is engaged to be married" (Dutta and Robinson, p.13). The reference to *Agrahayan*, the eighth month in the Bengali calendar, immediately grounds the letter in a regional temporality, contrasting the Western Gregorian system with the agrarian rhythm of Bengal. Similarly, the mention of "After this comes *11 Magh*..."

(p.14) situates the temporal consciousness within a specifically Bengali seasonal cycle. Through these subtle linguistic insertions, Tagore not only localizes his correspondence but also resists the complete linguistic assimilation of colonial modernity.

The names *Shelidah* and *Jorasanko* further extend this cultural rootedness to spatial geography. *Shelidah*, the riverside estate where Tagore spent several productive years and *Jorasanko*, the ancestral Tagore home in Calcutta, operate as more than mere locations; they are emotional coordinates of belonging. The phrase “Number 6, Jorasanko” (p.13) signifies not just an address but a symbolic space of literary creativity, family life, and intellectual ferment. The invocation of these place names turns the letters into mnemonic archives where geography becomes intertwined with memory and emotion.

Equally significant are the kinship terms like *Meja dada* and *didimani*. The word *Meja dada* refers to the second eldest brother, while *didimani* denotes the eldest sister or a grandmotherly figure deeply revered in the Bengali familial hierarchy. These relational titles are imbued with emotional resonance that transcends mere familial categorization; they encode a moral world of respect, affection, and generational continuity. The sentence “*Meja dada* has come” (p.14) thus

carries a warmth of familial presence, while the affectionate lament “Perhaps she has just lost a darling *didimani* who joined her in playing football” (p.24) reflects a gentle nostalgia for companionship and childhood tenderness.

Tagore’s letters also humanize his immediate domestic world through endearing references to his children and wife. “Then kissed Beli and Khoka” (p.19) captures the simplicity of paternal love, while his gentle humor is evident in the affectionate repartee: “*Khoka* said: Bela, I am feeling hungry for water. Bela said: Oh toothless, you don’t say hungry for water-it’s thirsty for water.” This intimate moment, preserved in correspondence, dissolves the distance between the private and the literary, disclosing how the linguistic play of home life transforms into an aesthetic experience. Similarly, Tagore’s use of the phrase “little wife” to refer to his spouse encapsulates a tenderness unmediated by formality or social convention. His statement, “Little wife-when I return from Europe, I shall ask you if you saw me” (p.19), embodies both longing and affection, rendering domesticity as a site of poetic expression.

The inclusion of these local names and kinship terms, therefore, is not merely ornamental; it functions as a narrative strategy through which Tagore constructs a

linguistic world anchored in Bengali sensibility. The language of the letters becomes an instrument of cultural continuity, resisting the homogenizing pressures of colonial modernity. By consciously retaining Bengali temporal, spatial, and relational idioms within English prose, Tagore asserts a cultural selfhood that is both modern and indigenous.

Moreover, such expressions perform an epistemic function; they translate the emotional and social structure of Bengali life for readers unfamiliar with its texture. The oscillation between the private and the public, the familial and the philosophical, and the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, all coalesce in a hybrid linguistic form that exemplifies Tagore's vision of cultural synthesis. His letters thus emerge as repositories of linguistic identity where affection, memory, and place converge to form an intimate cartography of Bengal. Thus, Tagore's use of local names in his letters signifies more than regional particularity; it is a deliberate assertion of cultural authenticity within a global literary dialogue. Through the idioms of kinship, the naming of seasons and places, and the affectionate tone of address, Tagore inscribes the emotional landscape of Bengal into the modern epistolary form. This fusion of the local and the universal, the personal and the poetic, exemplifies Tagore's

enduring effort to humanize modernity through the living pulse of his native culture.

Rabindranath Tagore's letters embody an intricate web of socio-cultural textures that recreate the very pulse of Bengal's local life. Through his meticulous choice of language and the infusion of regional idioms, Tagore lends his epistolary prose a distinct *Bangla* ambience, wherein every phrase, expression, and reference becomes a marker of cultural rootedness. His letters transcend mere communication; they emerge as cultural documents chronicling the everyday realities, linguistic rhythms, and emotional cadences of late nineteenth-century Bengal. Tagore's deliberate use of *Bengali* rather than English expressions, for instance, the indigenous names of months, reveals not only his deep attachment to the vernacular but also his subtle resistance to the homogenizing force of colonial modernity. The local consciousness embedded in his correspondence testifies to his affective bond with the soil and society of Bengal. By invoking familial relationship terms and cultural markers specific to the region, Tagore situates his writings within a recognizable local framework. His psychological and ideological orientation, shaped by both a humanist universalism and a nationalist concern for cultural self-definition, finds expression in these linguistic

choices. In this sense, the letters become a space where the intimate and the ideological intersect, where personal reflection shades into cultural assertion.

Moreover, Tagore's linguistic strategy reveals a conscious act of subversion against the Westernization of language and thought. By privileging Bengali vocabulary within an English epistolary frame, he performs what may be called a *textual decolonization*, a process of reclaiming the expressive authority of the local over the alien. His preference for native terms and references, whether for food, geography, or social life, establishes a symbolic resistance to the encroaching influence of Western cultural dominance. Thus, the letters embody a subtle yet profound counter-discourse to colonial hegemony, articulating the vitality of indigenous life through the idiom of everyday experience.

This cultural intimacy is most vividly manifested in Tagore's references to local places and activities, such as the recurrent imagery of the *ghat* and the bustling gatherings of villagers. He writes, "There is a boat moored at our ghat," and "And on the bank in front is a crowd of village women" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 24, L. No. 10). The word *ghat* denotes the riverbank used for bathing, social meetings, or transportation, and it also becomes emblematic of rural Bengal's communal spirit. The *crowd of village women*

evokes a vivid tableau of rural sociability, where conversation, gossip, and shared concerns animate the rhythm of collective life. Through such depictions, Tagore assumes the role of an ethnographer-poet, chronicling not an idealized pastoral Bengal but a living, breathing society deeply embedded in the flux of local interactions. The rustic ambience that pervades these letters transforms them into a painterly representation of Bengal's social landscape, where even the simplest image, like boats moored at the *ghat* or women assembled by the riverside, becomes imbued with the texture of lived experience.

Tagore's portrayal of local foods adds yet another dimension to his articulation of cultural particularity. The culinary imagery, including *dal*, *tea*, *fish curry*, and *country sweets* offers a sensory window into Bengal's domestic and social worlds. In one letter, he writes:

- ★ “Now the memsahib likes tea, and I had none to give her; she has an aversion for ‘dal’ formed in childhood ...She has not touched fish, ... gave her ‘fish curry’” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 26, L. No. 11).
- ★ “Luckily she likes ‘country sweets’ and consumed an old and dried piece of ‘Sandesh’ with great determination by using a fork to

break it” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 26, L. No. 11).

Here, food becomes a site of cultural negotiation. Tagore humorously contrasts the Western preference for tea, a symbol of colonial refinement, with the quintessentially Bengali staples of *dal*, *fish curry*, and *Sandesh*. The act of the *memsahib* consuming a dried *Sandesh* with a fork is not merely anecdotal; it becomes an ironic metaphor for cultural incongruity and the superficial assimilation of local customs by Westerners. The fork, a marker of colonial etiquette, clashes with the rustic sweetness of *Sandesh*, symbolizing the tension between imported civility and indigenous authenticity.

These culinary references are far more than ethnographic details; they reveal Tagore’s subtle critique of cultural elitism and his valorization of local taste and sensibility. Food, in his letters, operates as a language of identity, distinguishing the local from the foreign, the rooted from the displaced. By contrasting the refined disdain of the Western lady with the earthiness of Bengali cuisine, Tagore not only documents difference but also reclaims dignity for the local. His tone, playful yet poignant, emphasizes the larger politics of cultural representation that permeates colonial encounters. Therefore, Tagore’s letters stand as

lyrical chronicles of Bengal's lived culture, where the local becomes both subject and medium of expression. Through his portrayal of landscapes, foods, relationships, and linguistic textures, Tagore fashions a literary ethnography that captures the emotional and ideological essence of his homeland. The letters, thus, are not merely personal correspondences but cultural artifacts and spaces where Tagore reimagines Bengal's identity against the backdrop of colonial modernity, transforming the everyday into the emblematic and the local into the universal.

One of the most striking aspects of Tagore's personal letters is the subtle infusion of local linguistic idioms that embody the rhythm and sentiment of Bengal's cultural landscape. The *local color* in his correspondence is not merely aesthetic but deeply semiotic, and it encodes the socio-linguistic environment of the time, where language functions both as a communicative tool and as a marker of identity. The letters, when read closely, disclose how local speech patterns, slang, and idiomatic expressions shape not only the tone of conversation but also the psychological and emotional proximity between the correspondents.

This linguistic intimacy becomes particularly evident in the playful conversation between Bela and Khoka, where Tagore records a child's innocent literalism: "Khoka said

that: Bela, I am feeling hungry for water. Bela said that: oh toothless, you don't say hungry for water, it's thirsty for water" (Dutta and Robinson, p. 28, L. No. 13). Here, the expression *hungry for water*, a literal translation of the Bengali idiom *jal khabo* exemplifies the unconscious linguistic transfer from Bengali to English. Tagore's inclusion of this phrase serves a dual purpose. On one level, it captures the natural spontaneity and unfiltered innocence of child speech; on another, it foregrounds the deep influence of the Bengali linguistic structure on the speaker's worldview. The correction offered by Bela, tinged with humor and affection which highlights the pedagogical aspect of language learning within domestic and cultural contexts.

The affectionate address *toothless* simultaneously carries a layer of social and linguistic connotation. It not only mirrors the tender teasing that characterizes familial intimacy but also gestures toward the cultural construction of affection in Bengali households, where playful mockery forms part of emotional bonding. Through such minute details, Tagore masterfully records how linguistic nuances encode social relationships, hierarchies, and emotional subtleties. The slight shifts in collocation, such as the difference between *hungry* and *thirsty*, thus become emblematic of larger cultural and linguistic negotiations that

shape everyday discourse. In this sense, Tagore's letters transform into living ethnographic documents, preserving the textures of Bengali life through the prism of language.

The portrayal of local culture in Tagore's letters extends beyond linguistic particularities to encompass vivid human portraits that reflect his sensitivity to social and aesthetic diversity. A particularly striking example occurs in his description of a ten-year-old girl whom he encountered during a river journey. Tagore observes:

- ★ “Half boyish, half-girlish look is singularly appealing.” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 24, L. No. 10)
- ★ “Her face is fine-very dark yet pretty and her hair cropped like a boy's.” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 24, L. No. 10)

Through this brief but evocative sketch, Tagore captures the delicate interplay of innocence and individuality in the child's appearance. His depiction transcends conventional aesthetic binaries, particularly the entrenched colonial and patriarchal ideal of fairness as beauty. By describing her as *very dark yet pretty*, Tagore subverts the normative aesthetic values of his time, foregrounding a more inclusive and humanistic perception of beauty. His language resists the colorist bias pervasive in nineteenth-century

Bengal, thereby offering a subtle critique of socially constructed hierarchies of appearance. From a feminist lens, this moment highlights Tagore's progressive sensibility. He refrains from objectifying the girl or situating her within a gendered framework of beauty; instead, he celebrates her individuality through precise and respectful observation. The child's *half-boyish, half-girlish look* becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of identity, an aspect that Tagore recurrently explores in his broader literary corpus. It embodies a liminal space between prescribed binaries, inviting readers to perceive beauty in ambiguity and authenticity.

Taken together, these letters are not mere personal correspondences but textured cultural artifacts that trace the living pulse of local Bengal and its idioms, accents, aesthetics, and social mores. Through them, Tagore emerges as both an ethnographer of language and a philosopher of human connection. His creative documentation of speech, character, and everyday encounters unveils a profound awareness of how culture resides not only in art or literature but also in the smallest turns of phrase, gestures, and linguistic inflections that define the ordinary life of a people.

In exploring the semiotics of naming within the matrix of local culture, the intersection of what scholars

often distinguish as the “Big C” and “small c” cultures. Tagore’s letters, saturated with linguistic and cultural references, become a fertile site for understanding how visible cultural artifacts and subtle linguistic elements together construct a sense of belonging, intimacy, and identity.

The “Big C” culture, representing the tangible, institutional, and collectively recognizable dimensions of cultural life, is foregrounded through the recurrence of names associated with relationships, months, places, and food. These include references to the Bengali calendar months *Agrahayen* and *Magh*; spatial markers such as *Shelidah*, *Jorasanko*, and the ubiquitous *ghat*; and culinary signifiers like *dal*, *fish curry*, *sandesh*, and *tea*. Likewise, relational terms such as *Meja dada*, *Didimani*, *Beli*, and *Khoka* vividly capture the affective and hierarchical structures of kinship that define Bengali social life. These expressions, grounded in the material and social world, are accessible, visible, and immediately intelligible to those embedded in the cultural context, hence, emblematic of the “Big C” domain. In contrast, the “small c” culture, referring to the subtle, often implicit, expressions of everyday thought, habit, and linguistic creativity, is discernible through idiomatic constructions and culturally embedded

metaphors. Phrases like *jal khabo* (I will drink water), *hungry for water*, or *very dark yet pretty* evoke layers of meaning that transcend literal translation. They articulate ways of seeing, feeling, and expressing that are native to Bengali sensibility yet opaque to outsiders. Similarly, expressions such as *little wife* or *toothless* resonate with localized modes of affection and irony, highlighting the unspoken cultural codes that underlie everyday interaction.

Interestingly, these two dimensions of culture, “Big C” and “small c” are not always distinct; rather, they often intersect and overlap. For instance, while *sandesh* as a confectionery item or *wife* as a relational role belong to the visible realm of “Big C” culture, Tagore’s elaborative, affective descriptions of them open a window into the emotional and cultural meanings that belong to the “small c” sphere. Thus, through Tagore’s linguistic practice, one observes how cultural consciousness operates simultaneously on multiple planes: visible and invisible, shared and intimate.

Through this intricate interplay of local and cultural vocabulary, Tagore foregrounds the centrality of the Bengali language as both medium and message. His deliberate choice of Bengali over English lexicon is not merely a matter of linguistic preference but a conscious act of cultural

assertion. It highlights an impulse to inscribe the texture of locality through the rhythms, sounds, and emotions of everyday Bengali life within the written word. The letters, being deeply personal in tone, naturally invite a linguistic intimacy that English could not replicate. Bengali words thus emerge as extensions of selfhood and sentiment, embodying the writer's cultural identity and emotional proximity to his correspondents.

By invoking relationship terms such as *Didimani*, *Meja dada*, and place-names like *Jorasanko*, Tagore weaves together threads of affection, memory, and cultural rootedness. These expressions are not mere references but acts of cultural preservation, representing a linguistic homecoming within the cosmopolitan sphere of his intellectual world. Through the texture of names, the social hierarchies, emotional bonds, and communal ethos of Bengali life find their textual reflection, making Tagore's letters not just private communications, but cultural documents that speak of belonging, language, and the politics of naming.

Local Culture and the Aesthetics of Nature in Tagore's Letters

Rabindranath Tagore's personal letters provide a rich lens through which the intimate interplay between local culture

and natural beauty can be discerned. In these correspondences, nature emerges not merely as a backdrop but as a living, breathing presence that resonates deeply with the writer's sensibilities. Tagore's attachment to the natural world is profound, reflecting an acute attentiveness to his surroundings, where every flower, river, bird, and tree becomes a narrative element in its own right. Through his letters, one witnesses the Bengal countryside come alive and its flowing rivers, the sway of palm trees, the blossoming of *Kadamba* flowers, the gentle rustle of leaves, and the evocative calls of local birds.

The letters unveil Tagore's remarkable capacity for observation and his capacity to translate fleeting natural moments into lyrical reflection. He chronicles the moon in its various forms: the full moon, a moon veiled in haze, or the first full moon of spring, imbuing each celestial occurrence with emotional and aesthetic significance:

- ★ "Though the moon is full, a slight haze gives it the look of a sleepy eye held open" (Dutta and Robinson, p.27, L.12).
- ★ "So, intimate does nature become in strange and solitary places that for days I have actually been worrying myself with the thought that from now on I

shall see less and less of the moon” (Dutta and Robinson, p.27, L.12).

- ★ “But for the moment the moon is the full-the first full moon of spring” (Dutta and Robinson, p.27, L.12).

These vivid depictions illustrate Tagore’s sensorial engagement with the natural world, wherein the act of observation itself becomes a form of aesthetic and cultural practice. His descriptions extend beyond the celestial to encompass the riverine and terrestrial landscapes of Bengal:

- ★ “Just imagine, if my lady love had made her home on the banks of our own river Kopai...” (Dutta and Robinson, p.30, L.14).
- ★ “...silent river Gorai in a beautiful corner of Bengal...” (Dutta and Robinson, p.36, L.18).

Here, Tagore’s letters function as both personal memoir and ethnographic record, revealing the cultural specificity of Bengal through its natural landmarks and quotidian rhythms. The repeated invocation of rivers, local flora, and fauna situates his experience within a distinctly Bengali sensibility, highlighting how nature is interwoven with local life, memory, and emotion.

Moreover, Tagore’s engagement with nature is profoundly personal, marked by a lyrical intimacy that accentuates his aesthetic philosophy. The frequent use of

first-person pronouns “I,” and “my” signals an embodied presence within these landscapes, suggesting that his appreciation of nature is inseparable from the self-reflective and affective dimensions of experience. Observing the moon, the stars, the soft breeze, or the grass from a jolly boat on the river Gorai, he constructs a dialogue between the self and the natural world, revealing how aesthetic perception becomes a conduit for understanding cultural identity. In this light, Tagore’s letters emerge as a site where local culture and natural beauty intersect seamlessly. The natural elements he records are not merely ornamental but are imbued with social and cultural significance, reflecting the rhythms, values, and aesthetics of Bengali life. Through his meticulous attention to the natural environment and his lyrical narration, Tagore positions nature as an essential vehicle for expressing local culture, inviting readers to experience the sensory and emotional richness of Bengal in all its beauty.

Further, embedded within these letters is Tagore’s profound attentiveness to the natural world, manifested through delicate depictions of rivers, trees, birds, flowers, and seasonal cycles. In one evocative passage, he notes, “One-day something...titi bird... the thread of the river brushed by the umbra trees...” (Dutta and Robinson, p.27,

L. No.12). Elsewhere, he recounts a walk leading to a dam lined with palmyra trees: “We walked about a mile until we came to a dam with palmyra trees beside it...” (Dutta and Robinson, p.29, L. No.14), and conjures an image of a woman walking beneath *Kadamba* blossoms in the month of *Shraban*: “Instead we conjure a picture of a lovely woman, passing beneath sheltering Kadamba blossoms...towards the bank of the Yamuna” (Dutta and Robinson, p.30, L. No.14). These passages illustrate Tagore’s meticulous observation of his environment and his capacity to transform ordinary natural phenomena into literary landscapes.

Tagore’s attention to nature is neither incidental nor merely ornamental. The *titi* bird’s song, the *umbra* and *palmyra* trees, and the *Kadamba* blossoms function as more than descriptive essences; they are markers of temporal, ecological, and cultural specificity. The reference to the Bengali month of *Shraban*, in particular, situates his descriptions within a cyclicity of seasonal and cultural rhythms, reflecting the intertwining of environmental awareness and lived cultural experience. This attention to natural detail accentuates the aesthetic dimension of Tagore’s letters, while simultaneously revealing the embeddedness of Bengali culture within the rhythms of local ecology.

From a critical perspective, these letters illuminate the dynamic interplay between what sociocultural theorists have termed “Big C” and “small c” culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Williams, 1976). “Big C” culture comprises tangible, institutionalized, or codified elements of culture, visible in language, architecture, historical events, and formal social practices. In Tagore’s letters, the rivers (*Kopai, Gorai, Yamuna*), the trees (*palmyra, umbra, Kadamba*), and calendrical references such as *Shraban* exemplify such “Big C” cultural markers: they are identifiable, tangible, and formally acknowledged within Bengali socio-cultural life. In contrast, “small c” culture encompasses the informal, lived, and sensorial aspects of everyday experience, how culture is felt, enacted, and internalized. Tagore’s delight in moonlit evenings, the gentle river breeze, and the ephemeral bloom of *Kadamba* flowers constitutes the experiential “small c” of Bengali life, revealing the intimate, emotional, and aesthetic engagements that shape personal and communal identity.

Interestingly, Tagore’s letters demonstrate that these two dimensions of culture are rarely discrete. The “Big C” elements, the formal markers of Bengali ecology and seasonality, often overlap with “small c” lived experience. The bloom of *Kadamba* flowers in *Shraban* is not merely a

botanical event; it catalyses an aesthetic and emotional response, blending formal calendrical knowledge with personal engagement with nature. This intersection reinforces Tagore's holistic vision of culture as an inseparable intertwining of environment, sensory experience, and socio-cultural knowledge.

Moreover, Tagore's letters reveal a philosophical and ethical orientation toward nature. His attention to natural sounds, the movement of rivers, and the interplay of light and flora reflects not only aesthetic sensibility but also an implicit moral engagement: nature is worthy of respect, reflection, and reverence. In this sense, Tagore anticipates contemporary environmental consciousness and ecocritical approaches that emphasize the interdependence of human and non-human life (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). The rivers and trees of Bengal are not merely scenic backdrops; they are active participants in cultural memory and identity, anchoring his literary imagination within a socio-ecological matrix.

Tagore's correspondence also illuminates the embeddedness of local culture within broader narratives of identity and place. Through natural imagery, he conveys the texture of rural Bengal: the slow meander of rivers, the shade of native trees, and the flowering of seasonal plants. Such

depictions provide a culturally situated lens for understanding Bengali life, where nature, culture, and aesthetic experience coalesce. The letters transform ordinary landscapes into vibrant cultural archives, reflecting how the material environment is inseparable from cultural imagination. In this, Tagore anticipates what contemporary scholars of environmental humanities term the “cultural landscape,” where ecological and human histories are intertwined (Sauer, 1925; Cosgrove, 1998).

Tagore’s letters serve as a compelling site for examining the interface between natural beauty and local culture. Through detailed observations of birds, rivers, trees, flowers, and seasonal cycles, he constructs a literary ecology that is both personal and culturally resonant. The interplay of “Big C” and “small c” culture allows for a detailed understanding of Bengali cultural life, wherein formal markers of environment and calendar intersect with intimate sensory experiences. By situating natural elements within social and temporal contexts, Tagore’s letters become archives of aesthetic, cultural, and environmental knowledge, offering scholars a rich resource for exploring the interdependence of nature and culture in colonial Bengal. These letters remind us that nature, in Tagore’s vision, is never merely a passive backdrop but a living, culturally

infused landscape that shapes and reflects human experience, memory, and imagination.

In his personal letters, Rabindranath Tagore exquisitely captures the natural beauty of the Bengali countryside, weaving the essence of local color into his prose. The letters reflect his profound infatuation with, and intimate association with, nature, a connection made evident through his frequent use of personal pronouns such as “I” and “me.” By attending to the minutiae of the rural landscape, the rustling of leaves, the meandering rivers, and the varying hues of the sky, Tagore transforms the natural environment into a canvas imbued with social and emotional meaning. These descriptions not only reveal his deep affection for his homeland but also subtly express his commitment to national identity. Through the lens of aesthetic literary expression, Tagore demonstrates how his artistic sensibilities allow him to engage fully with the natural world, deriving both pleasure and a sense of rootedness from it.

Among the most salient aspects are local terminology, attachment to the homeland, names of events, months, places, and traditional foods, as well as descriptions of Hindu religious rituals, household objects, and natural landscapes. These components collectively constitute what

is conventionally understood as “Big C” culture, encompassing visible and institutionalized markers of cultural identity such as religious practices, local festivals, domestic life, and the tangible beauty of nature. Conversely, the monograph also identifies the domain of “small c” culture, comprising the subtler, experiential, and performative dimensions of everyday life. These include leisure practices, expressions of courtesy and humility (e.g., *namashkar*, *pranam*), vernacular phrases (*Jal khabo*), personal habits, and intimate engagements with family and community life. Notably, Tagore’s reflections on hunting (*shikar*), nighttime breezes, moonlit serenity, and the communal enjoyment of *hookah* exemplify this small-scale, lived culture.

The monograph, further, reveals a dynamic interplay between these two cultural registers. Certain elements occupy a liminal space, simultaneously embodying both “Big C” and “small c” culture. The regional identity of a *Bengali* or *Bihari babu*, for instance, reflects formalized social categories while also encoding everyday behaviors and interpersonal mannerisms. References to deities, while constituting the visible, ceremonial markers of “Big C” culture, also signify personal faith and belief, a domain of “small c” culture. Similarly, domestic objects such as

hookahs or *board games* may appear as artifacts of “Big C” culture, yet they acquire additional meaning as instruments of leisure and communal engagement. Intimate expressions, such as Tagore’s affectionate reference to his wife as “little wife,” exemplify the cultural intersection: while the nickname reflects a socially recognized form of address, its emotional resonance and local context emphasize the subtlety of “small c” cultural expression. Thus, Tagore’s letters reveal a sophisticated layering of cultural meanings, where the visible and institutional coexist with the private and affective, creating a textured portrayal of Bengali life. The overlap of “Big C” and “small c” cultural elements in his letters challenges simplistic categorizations, highlighting the intricate ways in which language, social practice, and personal sensibility converge to define local cultural identity. For readers unfamiliar with the Bengali context, these subtleties offer a rich, immersive encounter with both the tangible and intangible dimensions of culture, capturing the intimacy and complexity of Tagore’s engagement with his world.

The correspondence demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the local-natural ambience: the sights, sounds, and rhythms of everyday life emerge vividly through his words. Tagore’s letters often move beyond mere description,

offering portrayals of visible and subtle cultural markers. He charts the customs, literary practices, musical traditions, social attitudes, and culinary habits of Bengal, situating them within the contemporary social milieu. In doing so, Tagore illuminates how culture is lived, experienced, and transmitted in both domestic and diasporic settings, emphasizing its dynamic and enduring significance.

Moreover, Tagore's narrative strategy foregrounds the interplay between the particular and the universal: while rooted in the specificity of Bengali life, his letters resonate with broader humanistic concerns, reflecting a consciousness attuned to diversity, memory, and belonging. By foregrounding the local as a locus of literary and cultural insight, Tagore transforms everyday experiences into a site of reflection and appreciation, thereby asserting the centrality of cultural identity in the literary imagination. In essence, these letters exemplify Tagore's intricate engagement with the local, where language, customs, and traditions interweave to form a living archive of Bengal's cultural landscape, capturing both its visible manifestations and its more intangible subtleties.

Chapter IV

Negotiating Cultures: Bengali and English Influences

Tagore's epistolary discourse constructs local culture, both within Bengal and beyond the Indian subcontinent, as a recurring thematic and imaginative centre. His letters are not merely records of communication but repositories of cultural memory, including the rhythm, cadence, and ethos of everyday Bengali life. To substantiate this, Tagore frequently integrates Bengali lexical items, embedding them naturally within his correspondence. Through such linguistic insertions, he reclaims local cultural identity even within the English language, demonstrating an effortless bilingual fluency that bridges the gap between colonial and indigenous modes of expression.

The local-natural ambience rendered through the interplay of Bengali and English vocabularies becomes a space of negotiation between the global and the vernacular. Tagore's prose often moves fluidly between these registers, narrating the visible and invisible textures of Bengali culture as lived in his time. His letters vividly evoke the customs, literature, music, food, and attitudes of Bengal, transforming the mundane into a site of cultural revelation. In doing so, he not only documents the spirit of his age but also articulates a

cosmopolitan vision rooted in locality, where the boundaries between the Bengali and the English dissolve into a shared terrain of human experience.

Throughout the letters, the dialogue between Bengali and English cultures manifests not as opposition but as creative tension. Tagore's position as both insider and interlocutor allows him to critique colonial arrogance while acknowledging the transformative possibilities of global cultural exchange. He resists both the provincialism of nationalism and the homogenization of imperial cosmopolitanism, forging what Chatterjee (2012) terms a "plural modernity."

This dual consciousness renders Tagore's letters a textual site of negotiation, where the colonial encounter becomes an opportunity for introspection rather than imitation. His ability to situate local experience within a universal frame demonstrates what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) describes as "provincializing Europe", a process of re-centering local epistemologies within global discourse.

For Tagore, local culture was not parochial but foundational to his universal humanism. Through the analytical lens of "Big C" and "small c" culture, it becomes evident that Tagore wove together the threads of ritual, language, nature, and emotion to articulate a vision of

culture that was at once deeply local and expansively human. In these letters, personal correspondence becomes philosophical reflection, and the intimacy of the epistolary form transforms into a discourse of cultural self-definition. The oscillation between *Inga* and *Banga*, between the village and the metropolis, between ritual and reform, constitutes the epistemological rhythm of Tagore's early thought. Thus, Tagore's letters exemplify a poetics of localization that transcends geography. They illuminate how the aesthetics of intimacy, like love for home, attachment to the natural world, and affection for language, can evolve into a politics of resistance and renewal. His correspondence stands as testimony to the fact that local consciousness is not antithetical to universality; rather, it is the soil from which a genuinely human cosmopolitanism must grow.

Tagore's personal letters reveal an extraordinary process of cultural negotiation through a dialogue between the indigenous traditions of Bengal and the pervasive influence of English culture. His correspondence, written during the formative years of his intellectual and creative life, provides a compelling record of how he internalized, resisted, and reinterpreted colonial modernity. The letters serve as a living archive of his engagement with two worlds: one rooted in the ethos of Bengal's soil, language, and social

fabric, and the other shaped by the rationalism, civility, and sophistication of English life. Through his write-ups, Tagore emerges not merely as a passive inheritor of traditions but as an active interpreter who constantly sought to mediate between cultural inheritance and colonial encounter.

In his letters, the tension between the East and the West often unfolds through subtle observations on manners, language, and behavior. The Western lifestyle, as Tagore portrays it, is not only an external mode of conduct but also a psychological disposition, revealing itself in forms of speech, gestures, and the performance of civility. He contrasts this with the spontaneous, emotive, and often unselfconscious character of Bengali life. England represented, for Tagore, both a space of curiosity and estrangement and a site where he observed the ordered elegance of Western society, even as he recognized the alienation that accompanied its refinement.

Having travelled to England on several occasions, Tagore was intimately familiar with the linguistic and cultural ethos of the English. His letters reflect not only his understanding of English manners but also his acute awareness of how these manners were emulated, sometimes awkwardly, by Bengalis aspiring to social modernity. It is within this context that he employs the striking reduplicative

term “Ingabanga”, a fusion of “English” and “Bengali”, a term at once satirical and diagnostic. “Ingabanga” encapsulates the hybrid identity of those Bengalis who sought to fashion themselves in the image of the English, often at the cost of their native sensibilities. Tagore’s letters employ this term with an ironic precision. He writes:

The weight of courtesy in his words is like a burden making his shoulders droop; in debate he is the meekest and mildest of men; and if he is compelled to disagree, he will do so with expressions of extreme regret and with a thousand apologies. An *ingabanga* sitting with an Englishman, whether he be talking or listening, will appear in his every gesture and facial movement to the acme of humility. (Dutta and Robinson, p. 10, Letter No. 1)

And elsewhere he remarks: “No doubt there are many *ingabanga* Bengalis.” (Dutta and Robinson, p. 10, Letter No. 1) The irony in these lines is unmistakable. Through a carefully crafted vocabulary: “the weight of courtesy,” “meekest and mildest,” “a thousand apologies,” “the acme of humility”, Tagore lays bare the psychology of colonial mimicry. The *ingabanga* is a figure caught in translation, eager to conform yet unable to belong fully to the world he imitates. His exaggerated politeness and

performative humility reveal a deeper cultural anxiety and the desire for acceptance in the colonial order.

Yet Tagore's critique is not merely derisive; it is diagnostic of a broader cultural predicament. His observation of the *ingabanga* is a reflection on Bengal's colonial condition, where imitation became a mode of survival and identity a field of contestation. By naming this phenomenon, Tagore exposes the fragile self-esteem of the colonized elite, torn between admiration for the West and guilt over alienation from their roots. Through this portrayal, Tagore articulates the complexity of cultural negotiation and not as a simple binary between the East and the West, but as a fluid, evolving exchange. His letters demonstrate how English influence permeated Bengali consciousness, altering not just external behaviors but also modes of thought and self-perception. However, he also reveals how this influence could be resisted, reinterpreted, and domesticated within the framework of Bengali sensibility.

Tagore's letters thus stand as a testament to the colonial encounter and not merely as an episode of domination but as a dialogic process in which identity was constantly being redefined. His *ingabanga* becomes emblematic of this negotiation: a figure suspended between two worlds, embodying both the aspiration for modernity

and the longing for cultural authenticity. Through wit, irony, and profound self-awareness, Tagore transforms his personal correspondence into a commentary on the very nature of cultural exchange that continues to resonate in the broader discourse on postcolonial identity and hybridity.

Rabindranath Tagore's letters from his early years in England unfold a vivid tableau of cultural negotiation that oscillates between fascination and restraint, admiration and discomfort. His correspondence offers not merely glimpses into his personal encounters with English society but also an insightful commentary on the evolving consciousness of the educated Bengali elite in the colonial world. In his depiction of the *ingabanga*, those Bengalis who had embraced, or were seen to have embraced, English habits and manners, Tagore constructs a subtle portrait of hybridity, unveiling the tensions and aspirations that marked the colonial encounter.

In one of his letters, Tagore recounts with characteristic irony a scene that captures this cross-cultural theater. When a few of his Bengali friends entered their lodgings, their English landlady appeared promptly, extending a cordial "Good morning" in the most polished tone. Taken aback, the young men awkwardly returned the greeting, their nervousness betraying their unease in the presence of a *real live memsahib*. What follows, however,

heightens the comic contrast, and other *ingabanga* acquaintances of theirs strike up an effortless conversation with the lady, exchanging pleasantries with an ease that leaves the newcomers in sheer admiration. The sight of a Bengali speaking fluently with an Englishwoman, “complete in shoes, hat and dress,” was, as Tagore humorously remarks, enough to inspire “real respect in a Bengali heart” (Dutta and Robinson, p.9).

Through this episode, Tagore captures a moment of cultural performance, where linguistic fluency and social comportment become markers of proximity to power. The act of greeting like “Good morning” becomes charged with symbolic meaning, representing the boundary between two worlds. For the newly arrived Bengalis, the gesture was alien, a ritual belonging to another social order; for the *ingabanga*, however, it was a mark of sophistication, a means of belonging within the colonial milieu. Tagore’s tone, laced with humor yet tinged with introspection, unveils the ambivalence at the heart of this cultural exchange. The Bengali admiration for English manners is inseparable from a sense of inadequacy, an awareness of distance that cannot be bridged merely through imitation.

What emerges from such vignettes is Tagore’s acute understanding of the colonial psyche and the simultaneous

attraction to and resistance against Englishness. The *ingabanga* occupy an in-between space: they are not fully Anglicized, yet no longer entirely at home in indigenous Bengali culture. Their social awkwardness, their admiration for English propriety, and their reverence for those who can navigate that world with ease all speak to a deeper process of identity negotiation. Tagore, as both observer and participant, captures this transformation not as a simple dichotomy of imitation versus authenticity, but as a lived experience of translation, where gestures, language, and manners become instruments through which colonial subjects scuffle with their place in a rapidly modernizing world.

In extending his reflections on the *ingabanga* across his correspondence, Tagore unravels the complex interplay of aspiration, mimicry, and irony that mold the colonial Bengali self. His letters unveil that beneath the surface of politeness and propriety lies a profound cultural anxiety and the fear of losing one's rootedness while striving to attain cosmopolitan grace. Yet, for Tagore, this very tension is the crucible of creativity. The negotiation between the Bengali and the English, between tradition and modernity, becomes not merely a site of conflict but of renewal and a space where

new identities, new forms of expression, and new visions of selfhood could emerge.

In this sense, Tagore's letters are not just personal recollections; they are reflections on the making of a modern Indian consciousness. The encounter with the English *memsahib* thus becomes emblematic of a broader historical moment, one where the colonial subject learns, resists, imitates, and ultimately redefines the very terms of engagement. Through irony and observation, Tagore transforms the everyday act of greeting into a metaphor for a civilization in dialogue with itself, negotiating its own place between two worlds.

Rabindranath Tagore's letters from his early years offer a complex tapestry of cultural encounters and negotiations between the colonial and the indigenous. His writings unfold a detailed interplay between two worlds, one deeply rooted in the soil of Bengal and the other steeped in the elegance of English refinement. The letters do not merely record impressions of foreign lands or reflect the nostalgia of a displaced Bengali mind; they unveil a deeper psychological and cultural dialogue, a constant oscillation between attraction and resistance. Through his acute observations and unflinching honesty, Tagore discloses the layered complexities of a colonial subject caught in the

tension between admiration for English manners and a simultaneous awareness of his own cultural authenticity.

In one of his sharpest and most detailed portrayals, Tagore writes of the *ingabanga*, the “England-worshipping Bengali”, a figure emblematic of the colonial encounter. He observes, with characteristic irony:

To know the *ingabanga*, the England-worshipping Bengali truly, one must observe him in three situations. One must see how he behaves with Englishmen; how he behaves with ‘ordinary Bengalis’; and how he behaves with fellow *ingabanga*... An *ingabanga* sitting with an Englishman, whether he be talking or listening, will appear in his every gesture and facial movement to be ‘the acme of humility’. But catch him with his own countrymen in his own sphere, and he will display genuine temper. One who has lived three years in England will regard himself as ‘infinitely superior’ to one who has spent one year here. (Dutta and Robinson, p.10)

This passage captures, with disarming clarity, the cultural psychology of the colonial subject and one who has internalized the hierarchies of empire. The *ingabanga* embodies a fragmented identity, torn between self-

effacement before the English and arrogance toward his fellow Bengalis. His humility is performative, dictated by colonial hierarchies of power and prestige; his temper, however, unravels a displaced assertion of superiority in his own native sphere. Tagore's portrayal of this type is neither purely satirical nor condemnatory; rather, it is diagnostic. Through this figure, he exposes how colonial influence reshapes native consciousness, creating an internalized hierarchy among the colonized themselves.

The letters thus become a space of cultural negotiation, where Tagore's engagement with English civility coexists with his unwavering attachment to the moral and aesthetic sensibilities of Bengal. The realism of his representation lies in this simultaneous empathy and critique. The Bengali, portrayed as simple and humble, embodies a certain moral sincerity that Tagore holds dear; yet, he does not romanticize this simplicity. The English, by contrast, are depicted as disciplined and impeccably mannered, traits that fascinated Tagore but also filled him with ambivalence. His admiration for English refinement does not translate into uncritical acceptance; rather, it becomes a mirror through which he reflects upon the shortcomings and aspirations of his own society.

In highlighting the position of the *ingabanga*, Tagore constructs a sociological portrait of the colonial Bengali elite, a class suspended between imitation and aspiration. Their sense of superiority, calibrated by their years spent in England, signals a deeper alienation from their own cultural roots. The longer they remain in England, the more intensely they absorb its manners, and the more pronounced their distance from the vernacular world of Bengal becomes. This performative mimicry of Englishness not only creates fissures within the Bengali community but also reinforces the internal hierarchies that colonialism so effectively perpetuated.

Through this process of observation and reflection, Tagore transforms the everyday encounters of colonial life into a site of philosophical inquiry. His portrayal of humility, temper, and mimicry transcends the particularities of the *ingabanga* and gestures toward a larger discourse of identity formation under colonial domination. He recognizes that the encounter with English culture, though transformative, cannot erase the rootedness of the Bengali self. Instead, what emerges from these letters is a vision of hybridity, not as passive imitation but as active negotiation, an attempt to reconcile the universal with the local, the colonial with the indigenous.

In negotiating cultures, Tagore's letters ultimately unveil a mind that refuses to be confined within the binaries of East and West. His realism lies not in a faithful reproduction of social types but in his insight into the moral and psychological conflicts that shape them. The *ingabanga* becomes, in this sense, both a mirror and a warning, a reflection of colonial mimicry and a reminder of the necessity for cultural self-recognition. Through this interplay of admiration and critique, Tagore charts the contours of a modern Bengali consciousness seeking equilibrium amidst the tides of colonial influence and indigenous pride.

To comprehend Tagore's intercultural sensibility, it is essential to distinguish between what scholars term the "Big C" and "small c" dimensions of culture. The "Big C" culture encapsulates formal, institutional, and visible aspects, including geographical identity, class distinction, education, and material symbols of refinement. In Tagore's letters, references to *Bengal and England*, *ordinary Bengalis*, or *an English lady's dress and hat* represent this grand cultural narrative. They define the broader structures within which identity, hierarchy, and belonging are articulated.

Conversely, the “small c” culture signifies the subtle, behavioral, and interactional aspects of daily life, including the realm of manners, speech, and personal expression. Words such as *ingabanga*, *the acme of humility*, and *infinitely superior* capture the psychological dimensions of colonial consciousness, reflecting how individuals perceived and performed cultural identity. Courtesy and social etiquette, embodied in figures like the *landlady* and *memsahib*, demonstrate how cultural behavior often served to maintain class and racial hierarchies. Through these twin lenses, Tagore’s letters become cultural documents that reflect the material as well as the moral world of his time. His keen observation of both forms of culture, the grand and the minute, unveils how colonial modernity operated simultaneously at the levels of structure and sentiment.

The archetypes of the “Bengali Babu” and the “Englishman” both fall within the realm of “Big C” culture, representing larger, institutionalized, and historically codified aspects of civilization, including literature, art, philosophy, and social hierarchies. Yet, simultaneously, they inhabit the domain of “small c” culture, for they embody the everyday manners, behaviors, gestures, and attitudes that define lived experiences. These interactions reveal that the

boundaries between the two cultural dimensions are not rigidly demarcated but rather fluid and overlapping.

Further, while the distinction between “Big C” and “small c” cultures provides analytical clarity, Tagore’s letters reveal their intricate overlap. Expressions such as “ordinary Bengalis” and “a real live memsahib, complete in shoes, hat and dress” blur the line between social structure and individual behavior. The *memsahib*, for instance, represents the formal symbol of English aristocracy (a marker of “Big C” culture), yet she also embodies the everyday gestures, language, and self-perception that sustain colonial superiority (an element of “small c” culture).

This overlap emphasizes the fluidity of cultural identity under colonial conditions. The outward markers of civilization were inseparable from the inward psychology of subordination and imitation. Tagore’s letters thus map not merely external differences but also the internalized tensions of a society caught between admiration for the colonizer and devotion to its own traditions. The negotiation between these overlapping spheres becomes a metaphor for the negotiation of the self in colonial Bengal.

Tagore’s correspondence offers a sustained meditation on the connection and disconnection between Bengali and English sensibilities. He observes, often with

ironic precision, the contrast in lifestyle, temperament, and worldview between the two societies. Yet, beneath this comparative impulse lies a deeper philosophical question: what constitutes national identity in a colonized world?

Tagore's letters reveal his unwavering love for his homeland. His descriptions of *ordinary Bengalis*, the rural landscapes, and local customs are not nostalgic ornamentation but expressions of cultural belonging. Through his epistolary voice, he elevates the everyday into a form of national consciousness. His attachment to Bengali traditions coexists with a critical awareness of their limitations, especially when set against the discipline, order, and refinement of English life. This awareness, however, does not culminate in imitation but in introspection, an effort to define India's selfhood in relation to, yet distinct from, its colonial encounter.

The letters also reflect the harsh social realities of pre-independence Bengal. Tagore captures a society stratified by class, education, and opportunity, in which many Bengalis perceived themselves as inferior to the English. This internalized subordination reveals the deep psychological impact of colonial rule. Education, which was both a tool of empowerment and alienation, becomes a recurring motif in his observations.

Tagore's realism lies in his refusal to romanticize either culture. He documents the rustic poverty of Bengal alongside the mechanical sophistication of England, thereby exposing the uneven consequences of colonial modernity. His letters emerge as socio-political commentaries that reveal the economic disparity and cultural dependency shaping colonial society. Through his acute attention to local detail, Tagore constructs a mosaic of Bengal's national identity, rooted in humility yet striving toward self-realization.

At the heart of Tagore's letters lies the persistent tension between continuity and change. The conflict between Bengali and English lifestyles becomes emblematic of a broader cultural negotiation between imitation and authenticity, submission and self-definition. His letters highlight this negotiation not as a momentary dilemma but as an enduring process, reflective of India's historical journey from colonial subjugation to self-awareness.

Through subtle humor, irony, and self-reflection, Tagore redefines cultural engagement as a creative act. His awareness of English manners and his simultaneous critique of their artificiality mark a shift from passive absorption to active reinterpretation. The intercultural encounter,

therefore, becomes an opportunity for moral and intellectual renewal.

Tagore's letters are not merely personal communications; they are cultural texts that document the dialogue between civilization and conscience. They capture how colonial influence was experienced, resisted, and reimagined through the lens of everyday life. The interplay between "Big C" and "small c" cultures provides a framework to understand how Tagore's epistolary narratives mirror the broader currents of colonial encounter, unveiling both its tensions and its transformative potential.

In sum, Tagore's negotiation between the Bengali and English worlds becomes emblematic of the larger Indian struggle to reconcile borrowed modernity with indigenous authenticity. His letters thus stand as a testament to the creative resilience of a mind that refused to be confined by the binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, or colonizer and colonized. They illuminate a cultural consciousness that continues to speak to contemporary debates on hybridity, identity, and the ethics of cultural exchange.

Chapter V

Negotiating the Local and the Universal: Cultural Reflections in Tagore's Letters

The central aim of this monograph is to uncover the intricacies of local culture as represented in Tagore's selected personal letters. The letters, written across diverse contexts of his life, offer profound insights into the cultural and emotional landscape of Bengal, his native land. In these letters, the local culture emerges not merely as a background but as a living force, a reflection of Tagore's deep attachment to his roots and his understanding of everyday life in Bengal. Despite his celebrated stature as a global thinker and internationalist, Tagore's sensibility remains firmly anchored in the rhythms, idioms, and affective worlds of his homeland.

To analyze these letters with precision, the book employs Gee's "Vocabulary Tool", a discourse analytic framework that examines how language functions as a vehicle of cultural meaning. Through this analytical lens, Tagore's lexical choices are explored not merely as linguistic artifacts but as cultural signifiers, unveiling the intimate connection between word and world. The vocabulary in the letters reflects a conscious interplay

between two cultural dimensions often discussed in intercultural studies: “Big C” culture (formal, institutional, and artistic expressions) and “small c” culture (informal, behavioral, and everyday practices). By categorizing Tagore’s expressions through these twin frameworks, the monograph highlights how the grand and the ordinary, the visible and the subtle, coexist within the same discursive field. Each cultural element is represented distinctively and emphatically, offering a multi-layered understanding of Tagore’s portrayal of Bengal.

Through detailed lexical and thematic analysis, it explores the first argument: Tagore’s letters articulate local culture through recurring thematic motifs, such as nature, rural life, music, ritual, and domesticity, wherein the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of everyday Bengali existence emerge as integral to his moral and philosophical worldview. Through these themes, Tagore transforms ordinary cultural practices into expressions of collective identity, situating local sensibilities within broader discourses of humanism and creative consciousness.

The book identifies five major themes that constitute the framework of Tagore’s cultural representation:

- **Representation of Cultural Hierarchies and Regional Identity** – unveiling Tagore’s rootedness in the land and its people.
- **Representation of Hindu Rituals and Local Cultural Vocabulary** – reflecting the spiritual and ritualistic fabric of Bengal.
- **Tagore’s Lexicon of the Local: The Poetics of Household Culture and Emotional Topography** – capturing the domestic and quotidian aspects of rural life.
- **The Local Linguistic Imprint: Tagore’s Letters and the Poetics of Everyday Expression** – illustrating how personal and place names embody cultural belonging.
- **Local Culture and the Aesthetics of Nature in Tagore’s Letters** – portraying the ecological intimacy between people and their environment.

Each of these themes opens a window into a distinct facet of Bengali cultural consciousness, as refracted through

Tagore's deeply personal yet profoundly universal prose. Collectively, they reveal how Tagore's letters function as cultural texts, blending observation and imagination, memory and place, self and society. By reading these letters through the prism of local culture, this monograph positions Tagore not only as a poet of universal humanism but also as a chronicler of Bengal's lived heritage, whose words continue to resonate within the continuum of Indian cultural history.

The theme of local-regional identity emerges as a critical lens through which Tagore articulates the socio-cultural fabric of his time. In his letters, the figures of the "Bengali Babu" and the "Bihari Babu" are not mere representations of individuals but symbolic embodiments of regional consciousness and socio-political positioning. Tagore's portrayal of these identities reflects the complex ways in which regional belonging intersects with social hierarchy, cultural prestige, and colonial modernity.

Addressing individuals through their regional identifiers rather than personal names, "Bengali," "Bihari", reveals a deeper discourse of power and dominance embedded within everyday communication. Such naming practices, far from being neutral, emphasize the politics of place, where identity becomes a marker of both belonging

and marginalization. Through these linguistic gestures, Tagore exposes how regional identities are constructed, contested, and often subordinated within the broader framework of colonial and class hierarchies.

Despite his well-documented humanist and internationalist ideals, Tagore does not efface his regional attachments; rather, he allows the local consciousness to inflect his worldview. The traditions, beliefs, and values associated with both *Bengali* and *Bihari* communities are intricately woven into his correspondence, unveiling the tension between universalism and rootedness. It explores these dimensions in detail, demonstrating how the interplay of language, identity, and cultural memory produces a textured sense of regional belonging.

Tagore also subtly critiques the hierarchical structure of identity attribution, wherein identifying someone by regional origin (“Bengali” or “Bihari”) appears less prestigious than titles associated with British class and status. This disparity illuminates the colonial discourse of value, in which the nomenclature of the colonizer is imbued with authority, while that of the colonized remains bound to geography and ethnicity. Such distinctions are not merely linguistic but profoundly ideological, shaping perceptions of worth and social mobility.

Furthermore, within this epistolary discourse, the *Bihari babu* emerges as a figure of both enthusiasm and unease. Tagore's representation captures an oscillation between pride and perceived inferiority, mirroring a broader psychological negotiation of identity under colonial modernity. The *Bihari* subject, energetic and spirited, nonetheless inhabits a position of comparative subordination within the social hierarchy of the time. This portrayal emphasizes how Tagore's letters become a site of identity performance, unveiling the subtle gradations of esteem, aspiration, and alienation that define local-regional consciousness. Therefore, the exploration of local-regional identity in Tagore's letters unfolds as a dialogue between the collective and the individual, the provincial and the cosmopolitan. His epistolary world thus becomes a mirror to the sociocultural landscape of colonial India, where identity is not a fixed essence but a continually evolving negotiation of self, place, and power.

The exploration of local culture in Tagore's letters finds deep expression in his references to Hindu religious rituals, a thematic current that runs through his correspondence with remarkable subtlety and depth. Tagore's invocation of the sacred is never merely ornamental; rather, it operates as a cultural signifier that

anchors his reflections within the lived spiritual geography of Bengal. Through his deliberate mention of deities such as *Lord Shiva, Kali, Radha-Krishna, Madan, and Saraswati*, Tagore builds a symbolic map of the Bengali religious imagination, illuminating the intricate relationship between devotion, daily life, and local identity.

These divine figures, woven naturally into the epistolary fabric, serve as cultural markers through which the beliefs, emotions, and social consciousness of the Bengali people are articulated. The presence of such references highlights how Tagore's letters transcend mere communication and become repositories of ritual memory. His evocations of post-death rites, encapsulated in expressions such as "bone ashes," "Holy Ganga," "blessed water," and "offering of betel," reflect not only the ritualistic practices surrounding death and purification but also the spiritual continuity embedded in the Hindu worldview. Through such imagery, Tagore encapsulates the cyclical vision of life and death, connecting the individual to the cosmic order and, by extension, the community to its collective past.

Equally significant is Tagore's reference to the *Swayamvara*, the traditional marriage ceremony rooted in Hindu lore and observed among the upper echelons of

society. By invoking this custom, Tagore situates his letters within the socio-cultural realities of Bengal, capturing the ethos of a society negotiating between tradition and modernity. His letters thus function as ethnographic reflections, offering readers a textured understanding of ritual, class, and belief as intertwined strands of Bengali life.

In delineating these socio-religious discourses, Tagore accords them a privileged position in his portrayal of Bengal's locality. His language transforms the sacred into the sensory, terms such as sweet *kshir* and "jackfruit", both offerings made to deities, serve as linguistic bridges between the divine and the quotidian. These references evoke not only the devotional gestures of the people but also the sensorial richness of Bengali culture, where spirituality is inseparable from taste, fragrance, and texture. Through such vivid cultural imagery, Tagore renders the sacred tangible, crafting a world in which religion, ritual, and region consolidate into a unified aesthetic vision. His letters, therefore, stand as a realistic yet poetic chronicle of Bengal's spiritual life, where the divine and the local continually converge to shape the moral and cultural consciousness of the people.

The essence of Household culture and emotional topography captures one of the most intimate dimensions of

Tagore's epistolary imagination. Within his letters, the household emerges not merely as a physical dwelling but as a symbolic landscape, embodying the rhythms of everyday Bengali life and the affective ties that bind the self to the homeland. The domestic space, rendered through vivid sensory images, becomes a site where Tagore's personal memories and cultural consciousness converge.

Throughout his correspondence, home remains a recurring and emotionally charged motif. The letters abound with descriptions of ordinary yet evocative household elements: *the wicker mat spread across the floor, the curling smoke of a hookah, board games unfolding in quiet courtyards, cows reclining in the open yard, cakes of cow dung drying on the walls, the shaded verandah, the oil-smearred utensils, the grimy corners, and the thin film of dust coating familiar objects*. Each of these details is imbued with the warmth of recognition and the depth of belonging. They evoke not only the material environment of Bengal's rustic households but also the sensory texture of Tagore's emotional geography.

In several letters, Tagore's expressions of being "homesick" or "seasick" transcend their literal sense, signifying a deeper longing for the familiar rhythms of his homeland. The discomfort of distance and the yearning for

return reveal a profound attachment to place and a sentiment that transforms the domestic into the poetic. The letters thus serve as an archive of Tagore's affective world, where nostalgia for home intertwines with reflections on identity, belonging, and the continuity of tradition.

Equally telling are his linguistic choices, which anchor the letters in the soil of Bengal. Tagore frequently weaves colloquial Bengali expressions into his English correspondence, phrases such as *Jal khabo* or *Pani pan korbo*, not as ornamental insertions but as cultural markers that breathe authenticity into his prose. These linguistic gestures blur the divide between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan, unveiling Tagore's effortless navigation between languages and worlds. His words carry the cadence of Bengali thought, even when framed within the structures of English syntax.

Through such delicate interweaving of language, imagery, and sentiment, Tagore transforms the rustic household into a microcosm of Bengali culture. The domestic artifacts, local expressions, and everyday routines collectively articulate a lived philosophy which celebrates simplicity, intimacy, and the sanctity of home. In this way, Tagore's letters transcend their documentary nature to become a subtle ethnography of his world, where the

personal and the cultural, the aesthetic and the emotional, exist in perfect harmony.

One of the most distinctive dimensions of Tagore's epistolary world emerges through what may be termed the local culture in the poetics of everyday expression. Within his letters, Tagore invokes a constellation of local Bengali names of persons, foods, seasons, months, and places that collectively construct a cultural geography deeply rooted in Bengal's social and emotional landscape. Words such as *Agrahayen*, *Magh*, *Shelidah*, *Jorasanko*, *Meja Dada*, *Didimani*, *Beli*, *Khoka*, and *little wife* are not mere lexical units; they are cultural signifiers, each carrying the weight of lived experience, affective intimacy, and regional belonging.

Tagore's meticulous use of such nomenclature imbues his correspondence with authenticity and emotional immediacy. His references to familiar locales like *Shelidah* and *Jorasanko* are not only geographical markers but also sites of memory, evoking the rhythms of domestic life that shaped his creative consciousness. Likewise, kinship terms such as *Didimani* and *Meja Dada* extend beyond relational address; they embody Bengal's intricate familial hierarchies and affective warmth, reflecting a culture where identity is inseparable from relationality. Through these names, Tagore transforms the private space of the letter into a repository of

collective sentiment, where language becomes both intimate and emblematic.

The personal nature of Tagore's letters explains his seamless preference for Bengali vocabulary. These expressions were part of a shared linguistic and emotional world between the writer and his recipients, who intuitively understood the nuances embedded in each word. The informality of nicknames such as *Khoka* or *Beli* further intensifies the letters' sincerity, unveiling Tagore not as a distant literary figure but as a brother, friend, or affectionate mentor.

In this way, language becomes a vessel of culture and emotion, merging personal affection with cultural representation. Through his selective and deliberate use of local vocabulary, Tagore articulates the sensibility of Bengali life and its warmth, tenderness, and everyday poetics. Each word, rooted in the soil of Bengal, transforms his correspondence into a living archive of cultural intimacy, where personal memory and collective identity coexist in delicate harmony.

The essence of local culture and the aesthetics of natural beauty emerges as one of the most evocative strands in Tagore's letters, where nature becomes not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the articulation of

cultural identity. Through vivid and lyrical descriptions, Tagore transforms the Bengal landscape into a living text that embodies the spirit, rhythm, and emotional resonance of his homeland. The letters abound with portrayals of Bengal's countryside, rendered through his attentive observation of flowers, rivers, birds, and trees. Each image is meticulously crafted, exposing his deep sensitivity to the natural environment that nurtured his imagination.

Within these letters, Tagore frequently invokes specific cultural-natural symbols such as the *titi bird's call*, the *umbra* and *palmyra* trees, the *Kadamba* blossoms, and the flowing currents of the *Kopai*, *Gorai*, and *Yamuna* rivers. These references are not merely ornamental; they function as cultural signifiers that root his aesthetic consciousness firmly in the soil of Bengal. Through them, Tagore weaves an intricate tapestry where nature and culture are inseparable, each enriching and defining the other. His portrayal of the natural world reflects an intimate and affirmative engagement with the landscape and vision steeped in affection, reverence, and artistic clarity.

Tagore's letters unveil his deep emotional attachment to the natural beauty of Bengal, which he often articulates through the self-reflexive use of personal pronouns such as "I" and "me." This linguistic self-

positioning underscores not only his personal connection to nature but also his philosophical belief in the interdependence between the human spirit and the natural world. His aesthetic perception transforms ordinary scenes into moments of transcendence, where the local assumes a universal resonance.

Moreover, Tagore's artistic sensibility and literary craftsmanship enable him to sustain an enduring communion with nature that extends beyond mere admiration into an act of cultural preservation. Through his letters, he reimagines Bengal's natural beauty as a manifestation of its local culture, ethos, and collective memory. The pastoral imagery thus becomes emblematic of a larger cultural consciousness, where the beauty of rivers and trees speaks to the depth of human emotion, identity, and belonging. Thus, Tagore's representation of local culture through natural beauty achieves both artistic brilliance and ethnographic authenticity. His letters stand as lyrical testaments to the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, where the beauty of the land reflects the beauty of the Bengali soul.

The monograph critically explores the second argument: Rabindranath Tagore's association with English cultural practices, juxtaposed with his deep attachment to Bengali traditions, exemplifies a subtle and layered

negotiation between colonial influence and indigenous selfhood. His letters, spanning intimate correspondence and broader reflections, serve as rich sites of cultural translation, where linguistic hybridity and intercultural awareness coexist with an enduring commitment to the local ethos. Through these epistolary exchanges, Tagore reconstructs modernity, not as a mere adoption of Western paradigms, but as a redefinition of contemporary life through the prism of Bengali cultural consciousness, unveiling how local traditions can assert their vitality even in the shadow of colonial hegemony.

The essence of Bengali vs. English culture emerges in Tagore's letters as a reflection of both connection and disjunction between Eastern and Western sensibilities. With characteristic humor and subtle irony, he highlights the attitudes and behaviors of Bengalis traveling to England, unveiling the ambivalences of cultural contact. The Bengali traveler, fascinated by the manners and refinement of the English, simultaneously negotiates a sense of self-respect, propriety, and local identity. Tagore's observations illuminate not only admiration but also the anxieties, self-consciousness, and occasional mimicry that molded Bengali encounters with Western culture.

Several motifs recur throughout these letters, serving as cultural signposts. Terms and phrases such as “ingabanga” (a playful reference to Bengali peculiarities), “the weight of courtesy,” “meekest and mildest,” “thousand apologies,” and “the acme of humility” illustrate the psychological and social distances between Bengalis and the English. These markers are not merely descriptive; they reflect colonial hierarchies internalized within the psyche of the colonized, unveiling the subtle interplay of deference, anxiety, and performative civility. At the same time, these expressions convey Tagore’s humorous, empathetic, and critical eye, highlighting the human dimensions of cultural negotiation.

This detailed representation aligns with established cultural theory, especially the distinction between “Big C” and “small c” culture (Kramsch, 1998; Moran, 2001). “Big C” culture encompasses formal, institutionalized knowledge, including literature, art, history, and codified norms, while “small c” culture manifests in everyday behavior, interpersonal gestures, and local customs. Tagore’s letters traverse both dimensions seamlessly. While he documents literary, philosophical, and historical engagements, aligning with “Big C” culture, he equally dwells on the gestures, rituals, and quotidian habits of

Bengali life, embodying “small c” culture. These two cultural strata are rarely discrete; instead, they intersect and inform each other, producing a rich, layered representation of Bengali identity under colonial influence. The letters thus function as a cultural palimpsest, where visible and invisible traces of both East and West cohabit, negotiate, and at times conflict.

Embedded within these reflections is Tagore’s enduring commitment to national identity. The letters meticulously record local cultural elements of India, highlighting his insistence on preserving indigenous traditions amid the encroachment of colonial norms. Through references to Bengali literary forms, music, festivals, culinary habits, and social customs, he foregrounds the distinctive character of local life, creating a textual repository of cultural memory.

Tagore also draws comparisons between Bengali and English lifestyles, both in India and England. These contrasts highlight social, behavioral, and material differences while illuminating broader socio-economic and psychological hierarchies. In pre-independence Bengal, many Bengali intellectuals internalized a sense of cultural and social inferiority vis-à-vis the English, a reality Tagore deftly captures. Yet, by documenting local customs, philosophies,

and daily life in vivid detail, he affirms the dignity, creativity, and resilience of the Bengali people, countering colonial narratives of supremacy.

In sum, Tagore's letters transcend mere correspondence; they are cultural documents, providing insight into the social structures, psychology, and intercultural negotiations of his time. Through his narrative finesse, Tagore renders the Bengali experience of modernity as reflexive, distinctive, and rooted in local consciousness, while simultaneously engaging with the transnational currents of English cultural influence. By integrating the analytical frameworks of "Big C" and "small c" culture, the letters illustrate the complex interplay of colonial and indigenous forces, highlighting how modern Bengali identity was negotiated, contested, and expressed. In this light, Tagore's epistolary practice emerges not only as a literary exercise but as a reflection on cultural selfhood, intercultural dialogue, and the ongoing negotiation of modernity in colonial India.

The monograph explores the third argument through the examination of Tagore's correspondence, which unveils a dynamic continuum between "Big C" and "small c" cultures, challenging the notion of a rigid binary distinction. Within these letters, the institutionalized markers of

civilization, including literature, art, philosophy, and social order, coexist, often seamlessly, with subtler patterns of behavior, belief, and everyday communication. Rather than existing in isolation, these two dimensions of culture intertwine and enrich one another, reflecting Tagore's vision of Bengali life as an organic fusion of formal and lived cultural practices. In this framework, each letter becomes a microcosm where the visible grandeur of civilization resonates alongside the intimate textures of ordinary life.

The essences emerging from this monograph emphasize the pervasive presence of both cultural dimensions in the depiction of local culture. The "Big C" culture, in particular, manifests through accessible, tangible, and socially recognized cultural elements, marking its presence distinctively and prominently across the corpus of letters. These elements serve as anchors, providing insight into the societal, religious, and regional frameworks within which Tagore's subjects operate.

Specifically, regional and social identities, such as the "Bengali babu" and the "Bihari babu", evoke localized conceptions of social hierarchy and belonging. Yet these same markers also convey everyday manners, behaviors, and subtle social interactions, situating them within the domain of "small c" culture. Household objects like the *wicker mat*,

hookah, *board games*, the courtyard-dwelling cows, cow dung cakes, and *verandahs* articulate everyday domestic spaces. The overlap illustrates that cultural phenomena are rarely confined to discrete silos; rather, they exist on a continuum where formal and informal, codified and experiential dimensions intersect. Religious rituals, including the handling of bone ashes, offerings to the Holy Ganga, blessed water, and the presentation of betel, emphasize the sacralized rhythms of life, intertwining the spiritual and social.

References to deities and religious symbols similarly inhabit both spheres. While the visibility of idols and the codification of worship practices align with “Big C” culture, the intimate belief, faith, and devotion expressed in personal and communal life mirror “small c” culture. Household artifacts such as *hookahs* or *board games* further exemplify this duality: as objects, they signify material culture and social status (“Big C”), yet as instruments of leisure, conviviality, and localized social practice, they belong to “small c” culture, intelligible fully only to those familiar with the social milieu. Additionally, religious rituals, including the handling of bone ashes, providing to the Holy Ganga, blessed water, and the presentation of betel

emphasize the sacralized rhythms of life, intertwining the spiritual and social.

Geographical markers such as Bengal, Shelidah, and Puri situate these cultural practices in specific locales, while culinary references like country sweets, tea, *sandesh*, and fish curry capture the sensory dimensions of Bengali life. Temporal markers, including months such as *Agrahayan*, *Magh*, and *Shrabon*, and natural motifs such as the *titi* bird, palm trees, the *Kopai* river, and *Kadamba* flowers, further root the letters in the lived natural environment. Even the intersection of Bengali and English cultures observable in references to ordinary Bengalis juxtaposed with the English lady's dress and hat unveils the subtle negotiation between indigenous and colonial cultural forms.

Collectively, these instances demonstrate that “Big C” culture is not merely a backdrop but an active presence within Tagore's narrative universe. Across the thematic expanse of the book, the visible, codified aspects of Bengali civilization resonate alongside lived experiences, illustrating a cultural continuum in which institutional and quotidian dimensions coalesce, thereby providing readers a detailed understanding of the interplay between formal and everyday culture in Tagore's epistolary imagination.

The formal structures of culture do not stand apart from lived experience; rather, they are continuously refracted through the quotidian rhythms of Bengali life, producing an organic fusion where the formal and the lived, the codified and the everyday, mutually inform and enrich one another. This interaction is particularly evident in the subtle textures of “small c” culture, which Tagore highlights with a delicate sensitivity to what is often invisible or easily overlooked. These elements permeate his letters, forming a rich tapestry of local cultural expressions that give depth and immediacy to his observations. The “small-c” culture manifests in the manners and social comportment of individuals, reflected in terms such as *sahib* or *sahiblet*, and in ritualized gestures of respect and humility, exemplified by *Namashkar* and *Pranam*. It is also present in the rustic domestic environment, conveyed through nostalgic moments evoked by words such as *homesick*, *seasick*, or phrases like “pretty calm”, which capture the emotional resonance of everyday life.

The letters further illuminate local expressions and idioms, where Bengali vernacular intersects with English, producing vivid imagery and unique syntactic play: phrases like *Jal khabo* (eating of water), or descriptions such as “very dark yet pretty”, “little wife”, and “toothless” convey

the textures of speech, thought, and observation. Beyond verbal expression, Tagore also highlights the natural and aesthetic dimensions of local culture: the quiet pleasure of a moonlit night, the cool breeze at night, leisurely pursuits like *shikar* or the communal enjoyment of a *hookah*, all infuse the letters with a sense of place and temporal intimacy.

This attention to both Bengali and English cultural markers, from *ingabanga* to the English idioms denoting humility, highlights how Tagore navigates and negotiates multiple registers of cultural identity. The letters do not merely record social reality; they actively mediate between codified, institutional culture and the lived experiences of ordinary people, showcasing how the ostensibly separate domains of “Big C” and “small c” culture intersect, overlap, and coalesce. Through this lens, Tagore’s letters emerge as a space where the formal and the quotidian, the monumental and the minute, coexist in an elegant, interdependent continuum, providing a richly textured understanding of Bengali life and sensibility.

These recurring intersections suggest that every word carries multiple connotations, making it challenging to preserve a strict separation between “Big C” and “small c” culture. Tagore’s epistolary world thus emerges as a dynamic continuum where codified and lived culture, formal

and informal knowledge, and visible and subtle practices converge. This detailed interplay provides a richly layered perspective on Bengali identity, local tradition, and cultural imagination, mirroring how Tagore navigates and negotiates cultural meaning across linguistic, social, and temporal boundaries.

The interplay between Bengali and English cultural paradigms emerges as a central theme in this monograph, providing a lens through which the elements of local and global cultural expressions can be understood. The discussion on Bengali vs. English culture highlights how figures such as the “Bengali Babu” and the “Englishman” inhabit the dual spaces of “Big C” and “small c” culture. While they exemplify “Big C” culture, including the formal, institutionalized, and historically codified aspects of civilization, encompassing literature, art, philosophy, and social hierarchy, they simultaneously perform within “small c” culture, mirroring the everyday manners, behaviors, and lived social norms of their respective communities.

The implications of these findings are both pedagogical and scholarly. By situating discourse analysis within the multilingual and multicultural Indian context, this book provides a framework for understanding locality, identity, and socio-cultural practices in textual

representations. Scholars and educators can leverage these insights to trace cultural attitudes across texts and integrate them into curricula focused on socio-cultural awareness.

Specifically, the monograph offers the following contributions:

- **Awareness of Local Cultural Ambience:** Readers gain an appreciation of the socio-cultural environment of specific geographical locations, including the manners and attitudes of contemporary inhabitants.
- **Understanding Cultural Intersections:** The book highlights the overlaps between “Big C” and “small c” cultures, emphasizing how institutionalized and everyday cultural practices intersect in meaningful ways.
- **New Dimensions of Bengali Culture:** By documenting the local cultural scenario of Bengal, the book introduces a novel perspective that enriches academic discourse on regional traditions.
- **Historical and Socioeconomic Insights:** Spanning 1879 to 1898, the letters provide a window into

Bengal's political and economic landscape before independence, contextualizing cultural expressions within historical realities.

- **Resource for Creative Writing:** For writers and researchers seeking authentic depictions of Bengali local culture, the book serves as a repository of idiomatic expressions, cultural norms, and practices.
- **Religious and Ritualistic Knowledge:** The letters provide insights into Hindu religious rituals, contributing to the understanding of spiritual and ceremonial life.
- **Comparative Lifestyle Analysis:** The book examines the attire, behavior, and language of *Bengali*, *Bihari babu*, and English communities, providing a comparative framework for studying cultural identity and performance.
- **Tagore's Societal Contributions:** Beyond cultural documentation, the letters illuminate Tagore's engagement with social development, particularly through initiatives such as the founding of Visva-

Bharati University at Shantiniketan, showing his holistic vision of education and cultural enrichment.

Collectively, this monograph demonstrates that Tagore's letters are a dynamic site of cultural negotiation, where the local and the global, the formal and the everyday, the visible and the intangible converge. By presenting culture as a living, overlapping, and evolving construct, the book provides scholars, educators, and creative practitioners with a robust framework to understand Indian cultural discourse, while simultaneously highlighting Tagore's enduring contribution to the preservation and celebration of Bengali cultural identity.

This monograph primarily concentrates on the local cultural features of Bengal, examining how these elements are interwoven with the social, historical, and linguistic fabric of contemporary society. The book seeks to illuminate the ways in which cultural markers like customs, language, and everyday practices, serve to represent the lived experiences of communities within a specific geographical context. Consequently, the scope of this investigation is necessarily limited, focusing on a defined region and a selective set of textual materials.

Several limitations emerge from this focus. First, the monograph is confined to letters written within a specific

temporal frame, from 1879 to 1898, owing to practical constraints of time and resources. While this period captures a significant phase in Tagore's literary and cultural engagement, a more exhaustive examination of his entire correspondence could have offered a broader and more detailed understanding of local cultural dynamics across different periods.

Second, the analytical framework employed in this monograph relies predominantly on Paul Gee's vocabulary tool, emphasizing the localized linguistic features that foreground Bengali culture. While this method provides valuable insights into the intersection of language and culture, it inherently limits the analysis to one particular interpretive lens. The exclusive reliance on Gee's tool may have constrained the exploration of other dimensions of cultural representation that could be unveiled through complementary analytical frameworks.

Finally, while the monograph highlights the localization of cultural elements, the depth and breadth of the analysis might have been enhanced by incorporating additional methodological tools. The integration of supplementary approaches such as discourse analysis, ethnolinguistic methods, or comparative cultural frameworks could have provided a richer, multi-layered

understanding of the textual and cultural phenomena under investigation.

While the monograph offers focused insights into the local features of Bengal and their socio-cultural significance, the outlined limitations emphasize the selective nature of the research and suggest potential avenues for future exploration.

The present monograph, while highlighting the contours of local culture in a selected letters of Rabindranath Tagore's personal letters, also opens multiple avenues for future research. The letters analyzed here represent only a fraction of Tagore's extensive epistolary oeuvre, leaving significant scope for examining the interplay between local and global cultural sensibilities. Specifically, a focused book of letters addressed to correspondents outside India could shed light on the role of global culture in Tagore's thought, enabling comparative analyses between indigenous traditions and cross-cultural influences. Such an approach would allow scholars to explore the synergies and tensions between the local and the cosmopolitan, providing a richer understanding of Tagore's engagement with both worlds.

Beyond cultural dimensions, these letters also present fertile ground for investigating philosophical and socio-political themes embedded within them. Concepts

such as humanism, nationalism, and internationalism recur across his correspondence, mirroring his detailed understanding of the individual, the nation, and the global community. A systematic future study of these themes could contribute significantly to the scholarship on Tagore's ideological and ethical frameworks, situating his personal reflections within broader intellectual currents of his time.

Furthermore, while the present monograph is confined to letters, Tagore's oeuvre spans diverse genres, including poetry, essays, plays, and prose fiction. A comprehensive exploration of these genres, with attention to local cultural expressions, would provide a more holistic view of his literary and cultural imagination. By situating local culture across multiple modes of expression, future research could unveil continuities and divergences in his treatment of cultural identity, social ethos, and the lived experience of Bengal, providing a multidimensional perspective on one of India's most luminous literary figures. Thus, the terrain opened by this book is expansive, inviting scholars to delve into cross-cultural, thematic, and genre-based analyses, thereby extending our understanding of Tagore's engagement with both the local and the global.

Tagore's letters emerge as dynamic cultural texts where the local and the universal coexist in a state of creative

negotiation. His epistolary world shows the rhythms of Bengali life through its language, customs, and emotional temper, while simultaneously engaging with the broader questions of humanism, identity, and global interconnectedness. The letters do not merely document personal communication; they articulate a vision of culture as a living continuum that resists rigid binaries between tradition and modernity, the indigenous and the foreign, or the “Big C” and “small c” cultures. Through his subtle linguistic choices and reflective tone, Tagore transforms correspondence into a dialogic space that bridges home and world, self and society. This book, therefore, emphasizes the significance of Tagore’s letters as invaluable archives of cultural consciousness, texts that embody both rootedness and universality. The findings reaffirm that Tagore’s articulation of culture is neither nostalgic nor parochial but deeply human, inclusive, and forward-looking.

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