

Mediating between Credence and Trepidation in Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*: A Cultic Folk Narrative of Forbidden Forest

Dr. Ashish Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lucknow Christian Degree College, Lucknow, UP, India

Email: [ashish.soni65\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:ashish.soni65[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: Myths may have common origin, religion or concepts but they vary in their characters, modes of narration and the perspective of the stories which changes as they travel through places and time. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban*, inspired by a Bengali forest folk tale handed down through generations in the Sundarbans, is an exceptional poetic retelling of an episode from *Bonbibir-Jauharnama*. Through this tale of Bon Bibi (the guardian deity protecting the Sundarbans), who is adored by both Hindus and Muslims, Ghosh addresses readers regarding the eroding ecosystem and his ecological concerns towards his passionate engagement with the Sundarbans in the age of climate crisis. *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban* is primarily an allegory of modern times. This work not only talks of lore and legends of Sundarbans but also focuses on the relationship between man and his environment. This paper focuses on the shifts and variations in the formation of myths and their literary aspects when these stories pass the waves of time, culture, society and modernization.

Keywords: Myth, Fable, Folklore, Sundarbans, Bon Bibi, Ecology

Myth is a concept which runs through many areas of contemporary thought: anthropology, psychology, comparative religion, sociology and several others. (Frye)

Myth is a symbolic narrative usually of unknown primitive that is ostensibly related to actual events and usually associated with religious belief. Myths are specific accounts of gods or superhuman characters involved in extraordinary events or circumstances in an unspecified time that exist apart from ordinary human experiences. Sundarbans is a consequential region that reverberates with folk rituals and perennial myths, communities living here worship animals and plants and folk rituals related to rivers, sky, rain, harvest and forest are common here. Myths and folklore are formulated and rituals are discharged accordingly. In such landscapes, myths are the outcome of the life lived by the subaltern groups of the society. Day to day hardships is woven into the myths, folklore, legends, rituals and narratives of the communities. In the Afterword to his verse adaption of a folk tale as *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban* (2021) Ghosh rightly remarks:

The planetary crisis has upturned a vast range of accustomed beliefs and expectations, among them many that pertain to literature and literary forms. In the Before Times, stories like this one would have been considered child-like, and thus fare for children. But today, it is increasingly clear that such stories are founded on a better understanding of the human predicament than many narratives that are considered serious and adult.

The classic definition of myth is closely explained in William Bascom's article "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives" where he defines it as tale that is believed to be true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the

world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters. Though they originate from the primitive past, myths are reflections of a profound reality.

Different communities and different civilizations have different mythologies based on their reality, but there appear to be common images, themes and motives which Jung calls archetypes. Originating from Maud Bodkin's renowned work titled *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934), archetypal literary criticism, alternatively called myth criticism generally identifies manifestations of mythology in a literary work. It regards literary works as expressions or embodiments of recurrent mythic patterns or structures. However, it was not until the work of the Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye that myth criticism was theorized purely in literary terms.

When one says myth - many imaginative ideas, childhood memories, stories from grandparents and even their beliefs emerge in their mind. In general, it can be said that myths are narratives or stories embedded in society through traditional, cultural, religious and regional processes and influences. They cannot be called fictional elements or stories because they are a lot more than that. Myth carries the culture, history, nature and society of the specific region to which it belongs. It is a vast and mysterious field to explore. Myths are not old beliefs and the stories of gods, they serve a more profound purpose of building, regulating and connecting different parts of the world. People unknown to each other far from similarities may be circulating similar myths. For instance, the mythical story of the Flood and Noah's Ark in European culture, the Deucalion and flood by Zeus in the Greek legends, the myth of flood in Egyptian mythology involving the God Ra and his daughter Sekhmet, the story of the great flood (*mahapralay*) and the rescue of Manu in the Indian subcontinent- all these

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myths share the same tales at some or the other level. As evident in the above instance, the background shares similar concepts only molded in the regional and cultural context.

Myths are often considered to have a religious origins including supernatural beings, divine powers and moral insight to provide the masses with an effective and logical explanation of human existence and its acts. These are believed to be traditional old stories developed through fantasy and absurd imagination including the concept of God, creation of the world, working of nature and incarnation of God in human form (*avatar*). The origin of myths is anonymous and is perceived as an act of cultural ideology.

When one attempts to define myth in colloquial terms, one often refers to an untrue story or anything that is opposed to reality. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, myth is defined as “a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events and embodying some popular idea concerning natural history or historical phenomena” (King 48). The word myth has been derived from the Greek word *mythos* which has a range of meanings from words, through sayings and stories, to fiction rooted in the folk beliefs or religion of the ancient times. It is a “chameleonic term” in the views of Henry A. Murray. In the beginning, myths were handed down from one generation to another orally, but when ancient myths were preserved in written form, they became literature incarnating divine creatures. Inspired by such a folk tale that has been handed down through generations in the Sundarbans, Amitav Ghosh has refurbished an ancient tale which was wrapped in layers of beliefs and superstitions. In the Afterword of *Jungle Nama* Ghosh says:

Jungle Nama is an adaptation of a legend from the Sundarban, the world’s largest mangrove forest. For the people who live in and around the forest, the story of Bon Bibi is a charter that regulates every aspect of life; the beliefs associated with it dictate how they relate to the forest, and to the beings that inhabit it, especially tigers.

Famed for their simple lifestyle, honesty, and humility, the people of Sundarbans reflect a sincere bond with mother-nature and gods. The culture of Sundarbans still revolves around its traditional ethics, moral values, ecological uniqueness and rich mythology.

The Sundarbans is the world’s largest forest in the delta formed by the confluence of river Ganges, river Brahmaputra and river Meghna in the Bay of Bengal; spanning 25,000 sq km across the borders of Bangladesh and India. Situated in the southern part of the Gangetic basin and stretches between river Hoogly in the west of West Bengal and in the east by river Meghna in Bangladesh, this mangrove forest was declared as UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987 due to its diverse ecosystem.

The name of this enchantress forest Sundarbans is believed to be derived from Sundari (Heritiera Fomes), the name of a tree that is found extensively in this geographical region and forms

the largest mangrove forest on earth. The word ‘Sundar Ban’ literally means ‘beautiful forest’. Today along with numerous species of flora and fauna, Sundarbans is a sizable natural habitat of Royal Bengal Tigers and this is home to more than 4.5 millions of human inhabitants who are economically poor and are essentially dependent on ecosystem and its natural resources. The villagers of this forest are largely agriculture-based belonging to the lowest social strata; few among them are *Bauley* (wood-cutters), *Mauley* (honey collectors) and *Malangis* (salt makers). Fishing is an integral part of their livelihood; women and old men they indulge in the works like prawn catching and crab collection from rivers. In this dark and dense forest, village folks are vulnerable to natural calamities as well as fear of snake, crocodile and tigers. Struggle for survival and a sense of danger always prevails in the minds of these forest dwellers; these hazardous spaces give rise to the feelings of fright and astonishment herewith generating the idea of forest deities or forest spirits. Forest dwellers of Sundarbans thus believe on beatific powers and holy spirits who can save their lives from the perils; inhabitants, who depend on the jungle for their daily sustenance by fetching timber, wax, honey, fish and crab, etc. believed that the invocation and adoration of the Bon Bibi – the lady of the forest can save them from the attack of tigers.

In Sundarbans, Royal Bengal Tigers and other wild beasts are a constant threat to those who venture deep into the jungles, so the lore of Bon Bibi has become an inseparable part of people’s psyche. To safeguard themselves from the dangers of the forest people appease forest deity Bon Bibi. In the lap of nature people from different sects, religious and ethnic groups here live close to one another, in their everyday struggles and without their rigid religiosity they have shared common belief and reverence to mother Bon Bibi. “Bon Bibi Palagaan”- a musical and dramatic storytelling form is centuries’ old folk theatre peculiar to Sundarbans and is enacted throughout the islands.

Amitav Ghosh, the winner of the Bhartiya Jnanpith Award in his verse adaptation of *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*, brings to us a vibrant episode from the oral literature of Bon Bibi *Johuranama* (The Narrative of Bon Bibi’s Glory); a tale of an avaricious merchant and a poor forest lad Dhona, who was saved by Ma Bon Bibi from Dokkhin Rai- a demonic spirit feared by all under the sky, who appears in the shape of a tiger. Amitav Ghosh’s ardent engagement with nature and his ecological concerns of Sundarbans gave birth to this narrative in verse which is a retelling of the central cultic narrative of the Sundarbans i.e (i) *Bonbibir Jahuranama* (1284) by Boinuddin, (ii) *Bonbibir Jahura Nama* (1287) by Munshi Mohammad Khater and (iii) *Bonbibir Johuranama* (1305) by Mohammad Munshi. Illustrations by Salman Toor, a Pakistani-American artist illuminate this tale into a perceptible site.

Bonbib-r Palagaan- a musical and dramatic storytelling form is centuries’ old folk theatre unique to Sundarbans and is enacted throughout the islands. The age old tale has been transformed as Dukhey Jatra and gives a tale of two merchants

of Borijhaati village, Dhoni and Monai came to Sunderbans along with their seven ships to collect wax, honey and precious timber from the dense forest. There also lived a poor boy Dukhey with his blind and old mother Bibijaan. Taking advantage of Dukhey's circumstances these merchants lured the boy by offering him to teach trade, huge amounts and also to get him married with a beautiful girl. Tempted by the witty tongue of these avaricious merchants and owing to his own miserable life, Dukhey readily agrees to go along with them on the expedition. Though Bibijaan was not happy about this move of his only son; sensing the dangers of the forest which would put his Dukhey unnecessarily at risk, she informs him about Ma Bon Bibi and also instructs him to seek help from her at the time of need.

Dukhey, along with other sailors, set sail towards the dark and dense forest. After crossing rivers Raimangal and Matla they all have reached the forest. Merchant brothers Dhonai and Monai went in the depth of the forest in quest of honey but surprisingly all the bee hives were empty. They were deceived by the demonic spirit of Dakkhin Rai since they had entered his land without any offerings. After their day-long futile efforts, dejected and desolate both Dhonai and Monai went to sleep on the boat. Dakkhin Rai in the dream of Dhonai asserts that, if he sacrifices Dukhey to him then only they will be granted honey and wax and if he chooses to disrespect the command, he along with his sailors would be killed by his fiends.

Thus, Dhonai was left with no choice and both the brothers decided to offer Dukhey to Dakkhin Rai. Pleased by the decision of the merchant brothers Dakkhin Rai instructs them to go to Kendokhali and the next day onwards they are amazed to see ample amounts of wax and honey. Within no time all the seven ships were filled up with wax and honey. As instructed by Dakkhin Rai, Dhonai persuades other sailors and somehow they manage to leave Dukhey on shore. In front of the eyes of Dukhey all ships vanished, Dukhey was shouting but all in vain, meanwhile Dakkhin Rai in the disguise of ferocious Tiger emerged in the forest and was about to devour the crying boy; noticing the presence of the tiger there Dukhey recalled the advice of his mother and cried out for help from Ma Bon Bibi.

Bon Bibi! Bon Bibi!
Aamaake baanchao!
Save me! Save me!

Ma Bon Bibi heard the melancholic prayer of the boy immediately; in order to save the boy from the clutches of Dakkhin Rai she reached there with her brother Shah Jangali. She indulged in a war with Dakkhin Rai and the life of a poor boy was saved. Dakkhin Rai begs for forgiveness, Ma Bon Bibi forgives his life and Dukhey receives great wealth and property from Dakkhin Rai. Dukhey's mother's blindness was also cured and he remained forever in the service of the Ma Bon Bibi.

Dukhey's status was now elevated to the status of 'chaudhari' (landlord) with a lot of employees working under him. Dukhey's this powerful position caused Dhonai perturbed and now he was afraid of Dukhey. Dhonai sought Ma Bon Bibi's advice and she suggested Dhonai to marry his daughter Champa to Dukhey. This Dukhey Jatra ends with the wedding ceremony of Dukhey and Champa and all of them lived happily forever.

Most of the world's cultures and traditions believe that there are some or other guiding spirits for all elements and forest is the abode of numerous gods, deities and spirits, both benevolent and malevolent in sum and substance. So in such a case Sunderbans is also not untouched with such a belief system. Bon Bibi Palagaan has been surfacing in different forms, versions and variations since ages. Being a folk performance, Jauharnama is flexible in its structure, narrative and performances. Sandhya Rao in her, *In Bon Bibi's Forest* (2011) draws attention upon this timeless tale from mysterious Sundarbans along with illustration by Proiti Roy, to encourage the young minds to see and understand our myths and beliefs. The detailed illustration evokes a sense of belongingness towards a distinct culture of a place which is less explored. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* is the reinterpretation of this Dukhey Jatra in Bengali poetic meter known as *dwipodi-poyer* form.

Amitav Ghosh in an interview to Hindustan Times said that, "Climate change is the greatest crisis that humanity, as a species, had ever faced". Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* opens with verses depicting the geographical landscape of Bengal along with the rivers and their tributaries, mountains et cetera. Rivers are the life line of mankind, the epicenter of world's cultures and civilizations. Ghosh has a great deed of respect towards the ecological concerns in his writings. In Ghosh's words;

Many great rivers rise in the Himalaya
the Ganga among them, and he Brahmaputra.
Flowing down from west and east, they meet in Bengal,
and branch into numberless streams, some vast, some
small.

As a world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans is phenomenal in its grandness. One of Ghosh's uncles was a schoolteacher in the area of Sundarbans so his childhood memory is infested with lots of tales and jatra performances associated with Bon Bibi. Ghosh introduces Bon Bibi for the first time in a chapter titled "The Glory of Bob Bibi" in his sixth novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004),

'Horen is the one you should ask', said Nirmal. 'If you did he would tell you that Bon Bibi rules over the jungle, that the tigers, crocodiles and other animals do her bidding. Haven't you noticed the little shrines outside the houses here? The statues are of Bon Bibi. (102)

Amitav Ghosh returns to his childhood memory and Bon Bibi's myth again with his favorite themes of the mangrove

forests of Sundarban in *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban*. Ghosh's environmental consciousness shaped the *Sundarbans Trilogy* which consists of two novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019) and a verse novella *Jungle Nama: A Story of Sundarban* (2021).

The extraordinary landscape and the homeland of Bonbibi is an unusual terrain. The three most popular deities of Sundarban are Bon Bibi, the forest goddess often called Ban Durga who resembles to Goddess Durga, Dakkhin Rai (literally meaning 'lord of the south') a 'tiger god' and a pir named Ghazi Miyan. Annu Jalais in her essay "Bonbibi: Bridging Worlds" describes that:

One day, when she had grown up, Bon Bibi heard Allah bidding her to free 'the land of eighteen tides' from the exploitation of the Brahmin man-eating sage Dokkhin Rai who took the form of a tiger. (Annu Jalais)

In her book *In Good Faith: A Journey in Search of an unknown India* (2012) Saba Naqvi describes Bon Bibi:

She is definitely a less evolved Shakti deity, the female divine so worshipped across Bengal. Makeshift temples of Bonbibi line the edge of the forest and no local ventures inside without seeking her blessings. These temples are crude structures that usually have a single clay image of Bonbibi. The more elaborate temples are found in the villages. Here, the goddess stands alongside many consorts, which is usually a happy mix of Muslim and Hindus. Bonbibi also appears alongside the 'tiger god', Dakkhin Rai, who also has to be appeased.

Amitav Ghosh in the first part of his verse tale establishes Bonbibi myth, she is the vanquisher of all evils who came from Arabia with her brother Shah Jangali. Ghosh says:

...from Araby there came two beings of great power.
One was the Mistress of the Forest, Bon Bibi;
the other was her brother, Shah Jongoli.
Bon Bibi was strong, but full of compassion;
her brother was a warrior, his powers were legion.
(Amitav Ghosh)

Along with Bonbibi Ghosh in the opening part gives the description of Sunderban which is reigned by the 'tiger god' Dakkhin Rai:

This realm was once under the sway of Dokkhin Rai;
a mighty spirit feared by all under the sky.
He preyed on humans, in a tiger avatar;
whomever he wanted he'd take for his shikar. (Amitav Ghosh)

Annu Jalais in her book *Forest of Tigers* (2010) describes Dokkhin Rai as:

Dokkhin Rai was a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest.
One day, in a fit of greed, he decided to feed on humans.
For this, he took the form of a tiger. This was possible for him as, through his ascetic powers, he could magically

transform himself into anything he wanted. Due to his increasing greed, he gradually stopped sharing any of forest resources with humans and legitimized killing them on the ground that it was a tax (*kawr*) for the products they usurped from what he had come to see as his forest. It was not long before his arrogance and greed knew no bounds and he proclaimed himself lord and master of the mangrove (*badabon*) and of all its beings: the 370 million spirits, demons, godlings (*bhoots, prets, dakinis, deo*), and tigers.

Amitav Ghosh in his recreation of this age-old myth of Bon Bibi, very aesthetically weaves the tale of Dukhey who is an innocent boy with a lot of responsibilities at a very tender age is hoxed by the two greedy merchant brothers and now he is in the territory of Dokkhin Rai. Ghosh describes it:

On the far mudbank Dukhey Caught sight of the beast.
Its amber eyes glittered, as it watched its feast;
With its nose a-twitch, it sniffed the spoor of its game;
its ochre stripes shimmered, like tongues of burning
flame. (Amitav Ghosh)

Dukhey sensed the trap, that his life has been used as an offering to Dokkhin Rai by the merchant brothers. This sight of the tiger created fear in his mind of the poor boy, out of that fear he thought of his blind mother within no time is reminded of her advice:

...there's someone you can turn to when in need of
succour.
She's the Lady of the Jungle, Ma Bon Bibi;
But when you call Bon Bibi, you must do it right,
or your words won't carry, you must help them take
flight.
But sure to cast your call in dwipodi-poyer,
It'll give your voice wings, it's the meter of wonder.
(Amitav Ghosh)

Standing alone amidst the dark and dense forest in front of Dokkhin Rai, Dukhey without giving any second thought invoked Ma Bon Bibi for help:

Save me, Ma Bon Bibi, before I'm torn apart;
an unearthly tiger wants to rip out my heart.
It's not a mere animal, it's a demonic being;
no earthly creature could be so conniving.
Come, I beseech you, take pity on Dukhey,
don't let this prayer be the last I ever say. (Amitav Ghosh)

Bon Bibi heard the melancholic voice of the boy and his prayers were answered immediately. With the blessings of Ma Bon Bibi, Dukhey was saved from the Dokkhin Rai. Dukhey's mother's blindness was also cured in no time. Defeated in the fierce battle with Ma Bon Bibi, Dokkhin Rai accepts Bon Bibi's authority. Dukhey returns to his blind mother with lots of property and wealth provided by Dokkhin Rai himself.

There after Bon Bibi is worshipped by the inhabitants of Sundarbans. This tale from Dukhey Jatra is a living story for the islanders of the Sunderban, now this legend is enacted in simple folk theatre every year in the month of January throughout the Sunderbans with many additions, improvisations and variations. For the forest dwellers of Sundarban puja of Ma Bon Bibi is a huge celebration and is an intricate part of their lives.

Ghosh through his graphic retelling of the Myth of Bon Bibi in verse form presumes that myths and lore carry the wealth and richness of certain regions, cultures and connect shared beliefs, rituals and societal norms but there is very little account of any written or scripted background of these stories, myths and folklores. They were never accounted as the form of art but as the semi-fictional stories of morals or as connecting links to join different faiths and rituals. However, these myths are more than just stories as they develop the culture of a certain community. They connect their sentiments and educate generations. They provide the habitat with their history to convey and scope to define their different forms of art and literature. Mythical stories, folklores, concepts, images etc. that exist in a dormant state in the collective unconscious, perform a similar function, concerning the collective psyche, while they appear in the artistic and literary creations of members of a community, a race or nation.

publication of major works and books in the areas of linguistic research, regional history and literature, folklore, indigenous communities, archival research and other allied areas of sociological and ethnographic research.

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Author Profile



Dr. Ashish Kumar is a lecturer and researcher with 10+ years of experience teaching courses in both Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels. He has volunteered and participated in the translation and