



Amitav Ghosh: Engendering the Language of Dreams

Prof. (Dr.) Kokila Sehgal Mathur

Department of English, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Email: kokilasehgal@dsc.du.ac.in

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Abstract

An analysis of four riveting narratives by Amitav Ghosh give shocking insights as to how planet Earth is headed for 'omnicide' or extinction of all life forms. Climate crisis, he explains, is in effect a crisis of imagination and culture. With the skill of a consummate artist Ghosh interweaves history, politics and literature and critiques the dominant western worldview, its hegemonistic and arid perspective that has left us deeply implicated in the great derangement of our times. The mechanistic conception of Western Enlightenment alongwith White Imperialistic ideological web of power has promulgated a perspective wherein Nature has been reduced to a mere resource. The White capitalistic gaze has led to ruthless exploitation of 'Gaia'/Nature and created a carbon economy and resultant global warming with disastrous climate change episodes. But 'Gaia'/Mother Earth is a living presence celebrated in the songs, stories and cultural practices of colonized Indigenous populations. Ghosh's narratives reinstate these forgotten, underestimated values and reading of life. He is emphatic of the belief in the power of Literature, especially the Novel to rise to this crisis and establish a deep resonant communication in its transactions with the environment and the world around us. Postcolonial angst gives way to an international vision of our common humanity. The Novel, he opines, should engage with serious issues of collective interest, enter into creative dialogue with the 'other' and non-human voices, re-establish reverence and kinship with all life forms and become a vehicle for regeneration and transformation of perspective.

I. INTRODUCTION

"I'll teach them to dream"

---The Hungry Tide, 173

Amitav Ghosh's narratives have a mesmerizing quality of exquisite tapestry art, weaving with multi-hued threads, the web of life. Sinewy and taut, his riveting narratives have both factual and instructive clarity as well as a hypnotic power of the magical, imaginative and mysterious dimensions of thought, perception and human endeavour. Ghosh's ancestors were "ecological refugees" when the elemental force of Nature uprooted them from the banks of the Padma River in Bangladesh and to settle

on those of the Ganga in India and he himself has spent substantial time in Bangladesh, Egypt and Burma among other places (GD,4). As a traveller data-mining the cultural waters of the globe, Ghosh analyses how Imperialism driven by an ideology of White civilizational supremacy and dominance led to 'genocide' and 'ecocide' of the 'other'. The imperial-capitalist gaze has reduced Nature to a resource, built a 'carbon economy' and created global warming. Climate change episodes are the Earth's response to such violence, yet the Anglosphere desires hegemonic power and the maintenance of status-quo. This mechanistic conception has muted 'Gaia'/Nature but she is both fecund and wily: Hurricane Katerina struck the US

with nuclear force. To indigenous populations Gaia is a living presence vocalized in their songs and stories: the Bonbibbi folklore of Sunderbans; the Native Indians 'Wakanda' or 'Great Spirit' with 'Great Mystery' blessing all life forms; the Nutmeg of Indonesian Bandas is 'like a planet' with mysterious facets.

Amitav Ghosh asserts these non-human voices must be restored to our stories to revitalize all life on Earth. Through his 'storeying' he desires to engender a 'social epidemic' of empathy, of a 'sacred' attitude to the 'other', a deeper resonant communication of human potentiality through the powers of Spirit, Dream and Imagination.

II. DISCUSSION

An analysis of the stories, histories and politics of about three centuries of the Anthropocene in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Great Derangement* (2016), *Jungle Nama* (2021) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), give shocking insights into how the world is headed for 'omnicide' or "the extermination of everything-- people, animals, and the planet itself" (NC,82). 'Anthropocene' is a scientific term in the field of geological studies and refers to drastic changes in the Earth system from the more stable Holocene epoch beginning about 12,000 years ago. Human industry has led to the creation of a carbon economy wherein the generation of noxious green-house gases has wreaked havoc on the biosphere, making the planet's environment less hospitable. Ghosh explains how "the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general" (GD,12).

Climate change is a crisis of culture and of imagination he explains in *The Great Derangement*. The book consists of three chapters: "Stories", "Histories" and "Politics". By tracing the threads of history, politics and literature Ghosh critiques the dominant Western worldview: an arid "regime of thought", which has left us "deeply.... mired in the Great Derangement" (GD, 25,149). The European Enlightenment's "predatory hubris in relation to the earth and its resources" which sees Nature as merely a resource, entirely pliant and subservient to human greed and the manipulations of science and technology, have led us to a post-natural world, a denial of agency to Nature (GD,75). A consumerist culture proliferates where voracious appetite is leading to over exploitation and concomitant depletion of natural resources and is easily manipulable by market forces: the cultural gestures in modern art and architecture are complicit in this great derangement. It is ironical that an era which prides itself with self-awareness will actually come to be known as one of great

derangement that was evasive of its hurtling into self-annihilation. Driven by the "bourgeois belief in the regularity of the world" the project of 'modernity' has riven a chasm "between Nature and Culture" (GD,48,92).

Situating himself in terms of the "other" Ghosh expresses the writer's personal engagement with loss of homeland when he confronts a colonial vision of the world in the setting up of cities. Going against traditional settlement patterns of building away from the sea, British colonial cities of Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), New York, Hong Kong and Singapore are precariously sited on the ocean edge. These are most likely to be wiped out by rising sea-levels due to global warming phenomenon. Much of Kolkata (Calcutta of colonial era) is situated below sea-level and is prone to regular flooding. He notes a World Bank report of its threatened status and is anguished at the prospect of losing "my family's house" and frantically asks his mother and loved ones to relocate to a safer place (GD,71). This makes him sensitive to the barbarous cruelty of colonial masters in their enterprise of terraforming the colonized lands.

The Nutmeg's Curse, Parables for a Planet in Crisis contains stories from across the globe to detail the horrors of colonial exploitation of native lands. The Western model of 'development' is unravelled to expose the massive scale of brutal violence unleashed on native populations. A questioning of Western assumptions and categories of knowledge reveal them to be counter-intuitive. In fact the imperial logic of domination by a superior race and motive of self-aggrandizement has led to 'genocide' and 'ecocide' of the 'other'.

Unravelling the history, politics and saga of human pain and suffering in the colonial enterprise of the West, Ghosh writes that "the Banda Islands might be read as a template for the present" (NC,19). Conforming to Adam Smith's insight that the acquisition of wealth is more satisfying because it is desired by others, the many European voyagers set out to discover the lands of prized spices. The highly lucrative spice trade controlled by Venice was the envy of other European nations. The Portuguese and Spanish followed by the Dutch relentlessly pursued their goal of establishing monopolistic control of the Indonesian archipelago's unique natural products: nutmeg, mace and clove. Historical records testify that capturing these beautiful and serene islands the Dutch carried out a brutal agenda: " 'burn everywhere their dwellings'" " 'remove the people from the land, catch them and do whatever we like with them' " (NC,23). The Native Indian Pequots met the same fate: " 'we must burn them' " an act sanctified by Heaven : " 'thus did the LORD judge among the Heathen' " (NC,24-25). Sir Francis Bacon pronouncement that such genocide was lawful for Christian Europeans,

was followed by the codification of international law by Emer de Vattel: “ ‘nations are justified in uniting’” together, with the “ ‘object of punishing, and even exterminating, such savage peoples’ ”(NC,26).

The idea about nature as a resource to be appropriated, as a weapon to be used, were the foundational principles of English colonization. The wars of extermination of Native Americans were devastatingly barbarous. These were carried out by employing non-human forces as weapons. However, the English settlers glossed over it as the use “natural forces” and “natural processes”. In their aim to decimate Indigenous peoples they burnt down vast tracks of landscapes, culled the buffalo, both food and spiritual totem, deliberately inflicted small-pox on the natives, announced bounties on their scalps and indulged in genocide by trying “ ‘every other method.... “ ‘to Extirpate this Execrable race’ ”(NC,62). Their lands were defined as ‘savage, hideous and wild’ because the land was neither tilled or privately owned and animals roamed freely on it. In the ecological interventions of clearing the land, ‘improving’ it for plantation they assumed a right to re-arrange the landscape to adapt it to European needs. Renaming the Pequot river and village as the Thames and New London respectively, the Europeans effected an erasure of Indigenous peoples, cultures and world-view: “ ‘we shall all be gone shortly....the English having gotten our land, they with scythes’ ” would mow down the vegetation and kill the animals “ ‘and we shall all be starved’ ” lamented one of the Native leaders(NC,66). Violent ecological interventions done by colonial terraforming practices robbed the land of its beautiful life forms – trees, woodlands, shrubs, herbs, animals, birds and sullied the gifts of ‘Wakanda’ or the Great Spirit beaming with the blessings of the ‘Great Mystery’ (NC,71). Today the indigenous people are made to live on preserves but these have become ‘sacrifice zones’ for dumping hazardous wastes or used for bombing practice.

The cartography of the world map as drawn up by the Europeans had nothing to do with the cognitive and cultural space of indigenous people. It is indicative of the rift between the scientific and the imaginative in Western thought. For the Navajo Indians their land was imbued with metaphysical meaning; the stories associated with the mountains and rivers of their landscape serve “as a kind of scripture” (NC,51). In 1864 the US Army marauding everything in its path: land, food sources, livestock destroyed the web of life and drove the Natives out of their homeland. Years later when they were allowed to return to a part of their homeland, one of their Chiefs expressed the community sentiment saying: “ ‘we felt like talking to the ground’ ” as if it were a long lost living companion. But will Gaia/Mother Earth stand by and accept such a

totalising narrative which has been trenchantly dismissive of the religious beliefs, sacred traditions and culture of the indigenous people who begged the White man to consult the Earth before partitioning it: “ ‘ I wonder if the ground has anything to say? I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said?’ ”(NC,51).

The question arises whether Gaia will intervene and will the terrain fight back? For the Native Americans as well as the Bandanese “the Earth could and did speak” (NC,51). Landscapes were alive, full of mystery and enchantment. Nutmeg and mace are the products of a unique tree believed to be the gift of their sacred volcano, Gunung Api. The Nutmeg is “like a planet”, subtly multi-layered with a variety of properties and “superpowers” of healing and well-being (10-11). Like the planet or the Moon, it has two hemispheres; while one half can be beheld by the human eye, the other lies shrouded in mysterious darkness. An aromatic spice, it has curative powers; the Europeans believed it could cure plague epidemics and hence its value soared high. Just a handful could buy them a house or a ship. The European could only see one half of the nutmeg or its material value. The Bandanese perceived it as a magical gift of their land and it was an inextricable part of their existence, woven into their songs and cultural life, embedded in the collective consciousness of the people. Transplanting it to the terraformed lands of Barbados or Connecticut, it became a commercial crop that did not evoke any emotive response. The nutmeg’s travels is testimony of the Western mechanistic view of the world and the attendant loss of meaning. Ghosh articulates this bitter recognition: the climatic changes of our era “are nothing other than the Earth’s response to four centuries of terraforming” and the derangement caused by the “global elites” (NC,83).

The Banda Islands sit upon a seismically active zone and are a place “where the Earth shows itself to be most palpably alive” (NC,7). Gunung Api or ‘Fire Mountain’ towers over this landscape and the region experiences frequent volcanic eruptions. To the Banda it is a magical event almost like child birth, as rich alchemical materials are brought up from deep inside the earth to enrich the environment and endow forests with wondrous properties. In the ‘Budj Bim’ stories of the Indigenous Gunditjmara people of Australia the volcano in an ancestor. Quoting these traditional stories, the people claimed moral right to reclaim their lands in 2007.

In the spiritual traditions of Native Americans all natural phenomena of rivers, mountains, valleys or plateaus have a sacred centre. Man may come and go but these beliefs endure. In the words of the highly acclaimed Native American thinker, Vine Deloria Jr.: “ ‘the task or role of the tribal religions is to relate the community of people to

each and every facet of creation as they have experienced it”(NC,35). The Western world view is in stark contrast where Nature is a resource and the planet is a factory churning out lustful dreams of hegemonic control. The world economy and trade are heavily tilted in favour of the Global North in their control of Oil through petrodollar regime and continued exploitation of fossil fuels. The ‘lesser races’ are to sacrifice their needs of development and not add to the green- house gas emissions on the planet. ‘Climate justice’ is an empty slogan. Development of renewable sources of energy will disrupt the power equations as it will liberate many developing nations of the Global South from Western hegemony. But the giant energy corporations of Big Oil and Big Coal are unwilling to let go the gargantuan profits earned thereby.

The poem “High Flight” by John G. Magee which celebrates the slipping away of “ ‘the surly bonds of earth’” epitomizes “contempt for the Earth” says Ghosh. A copy of this poem was deposited on the moon in 1971: having stripped the earth bare, locust- like, it seems to be a prelude to the conquest of space and other planets. It raises the question whether the earth is expendable. Ghosh’s observations strike with great impact: “THE QUESTIONS OF WHO is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis” (NC,78,195).

Sir Francis Bacon emphatically pronounced Indigenous populations as utterly degenerate and fit to be exterminated. To be civilized and modern was to adopt a mechanistic view of the planet as an exploitable commodity, while the ‘savages’ were those who felt the life and vitality of Earth. This view point justifies war mongering of the West even today. The euphemism of ‘liberal interventionism’ is a self -accorded right to invade countries that resist Western domination. Ghosh analysis how Capitalism is “a war economy” and has taken over the thought processes of the world (NC,119). The year 2015 saw the publication of two significant documents on Climate Change---the Paris Agreement and Pope Francis’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*. The technical jargon of the Agreement favoured the Great Acceleration trajectory of material growth and favoured the preservation of the dominance of the Anglosphere. The Pope taking inspiration from his spiritual guide, Saint Francis of Assisi, perceived the world as having an indivisible ecosystem, not amenable to understanding in terms of mathematics and biology. Environmentalism must consider the heart of the matter: “what it is to be human”. Climate justice must “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”. *Laudato Si’* concludes with a prayer seeking guidance and help for humanity that has lost its way and is a critique of

“a period of irrational confidence in progress and human abilities” (GD,207,211-12).

Today there is a revival of ecosystems based on knowledgeable understandings of the Indigenous people. Yet, Ghosh is firm in his belief: “the planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth--- Gaia” (NC,84). The violent interventions of terraforming of ‘other’ terrains and slaughtering its indigenous life forms was informed with the ideology of freeing humans from Nature, subduing and controlling earth. Ironically it has brought on the planetary crisis and we are faced with the prospect of ‘omnicide’ or total annihilation. Science is unable to come to grips with the vagaries of Nature. The terrible destruction wreaked on the US landscape by Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Michael (2018) and other such cataclysmic events finds an echo in the Banda belief of volcanos bestowing benign as well as tragic consequences. It also testifies to the Indigenous religious beliefs of Vitalism, that landscapes are vital interlocutors in the conduct of human affairs.

It seems that Gaia has taken on a new avatar--- of the fictional, vengeful planet “Solaris”. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the White man’s gaze as narcissistic and still coloured by imperialistic ideas of racial and civilisational dominance---Blacks, Hispanics and especially Native Americans were denied parity in medical attention and forced to work during the pandemic lockdowns. Predictions of a ‘Covid Apocalypse’ for ‘backward’ Africa boomeranged. Poor countries like Cuba and Somalia rushed doctors to Italy to help tide over the health crisis there. At the start of the pandemic ‘World Economic Forum’ declared the US and UK at the top of the list of “Countries Best Prepared to Deal with the Pandemic”. Western hubris read the Pandemic as a concern for poorer countries, but on the contrary, the social fabric of the US was ripped apart by political incompetency, anti -vaccine protests and racial tensions which erupted on the streets across America. Wild fires in California, devastating Hurricanes, floods in Houston the centre of the global oil industry, the waywardness of the Missouri River convey a sense of helplessness in the face of non-human forces. It is suggestive of the ‘uncanny’: how these landscapes formed anew have unleashed unseen presences that seem bent on “throwing off the forms that settlers imposed on them, as a preliminary to switching to some new, unknown state” (NC,144).

Literature has to rise to this crisis by imagining the possibilities of a ‘re’-cognition of vitalist sources to engage in a deep resonant communication in its transactions with the environment and the world around us. It has to be possessed of a sense of recognition that

other 'beings' in Nature have "the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness" (GD,41). Kimmerer, a Native American scientist treats plants as a subject of scientific investigation as well as the subject matter of songs and stories. True science would be humble in the unravelling of the mystery of another life-system and be filled with wonder at beholding it. In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she writes how "our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?" (NC,97).

Ghosh declares that the healing mantra will be uttered by the novelist. Through his narratives he will revive the tales and accounts of the luminous past, the songs and stories of "the idea of the sacred" to meet the challenges of climate change which is a 'wicked problem'(GD,215). He must see that "nonhuman voices be restored to our stories" because "nonhumans can, do, and must speak" and take us out of this suffocating world by opening a doorway to the spirit world. He must bring to us the magical voice of Gaia because "the fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it" (NC,257).

The *Hungry Tide* and *Jungle Nama* are about 'beholding' and to be 'beheld' by the nonhuman presences that surround us with their awesome mystery and beauty. Located in the Sunderbans region of coastal Bengal both these narratives are about the 'uncanny' interventions of nonhuman forms of being in the tide of human affairs.

The *Hungry Tide* consists of two parts: – "The Ebb: Bhata" and "The Flood: Jowar". It conveys the unceasing fluctuations in man's destiny; migration and marginalization of the "Bastuhara" or dispossessed people of the Sunderbans; diaspora concerns of uprootedness and seeking of common bonds and the need for meaningful communication with the 'other'. Flux, discordance and seeking of Utopia are set up against a backdrop of the might of Nature. Above all the novel is a revelation of Ghosh's unique perception of "the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the non-human" (GD, 43).

Ghosh's description of the Sunderbans weaves a masterful blend of realism, history, myth and the uncanny. Ancient Hindu mythology has it that the sacred Ganga River in its descent on Earth had to necessarily pass-through Lord Shiva's matted locks in order to check her potentially destructive force. This "heavenly braid" meandering down the vast plains towards the sea, gets distributed into a labyrinth of water channels when the Lord's matted locks become undone. Dividing the land into innumerable portions it creates an immense archipelago of three hundred kilometres off the coast of West Bengal and the Meghna River in Bangladesh. The archipelago hosts the mangrove forests of 'Sundari' trees and is named

"Sunderbans" or 'beautiful forest'. The distributaries have evocative names and the confluence of rivers forms a "mohona" or enchantment. When the sea tide flows all the way inwards, the borders of land and sea, fresh and salt water flows are indistinguishable. The vicissitudes of the tide swallow up or create new landmasses; forests are submerged but tenaciously re-emerge and propagate; the jungle of 'sundari' trees does not present a pretty vista – rather the mangrove foliage is prohibitively dense, leathery and tough, the branches gnarled, the breathing roots protrude as sharp spikes through the soil and hardly have delicate vines or flowers or birds. The terrain is inhospitable as many people lose their lives trapped in the impenetrable forest or fall prey to predators like tigers, crocodiles and snakes. It is a fascinating landscape and yet a forbidding place: "at no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its determination to destroy or expel them"(HT,6, 8). According to native belief only those with a pure heart are guaranteed safe passage by Bon Bibi, the Goddess of the forest.

The Sunderban islands "are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the achol that follows her" and the "doormat, the threshold" for the innumerable invaders of India (HT,6,50). Places like Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi, Emilybari still stand today and testify to India's colonial history. Yet there was one settler armed with the idea of establishing a Utopian society. In 1903 Sir Daniel Hamilton, a wealthy Scotsman bought 10 thousand acres of this land from the British regime. He decided to re-name it as 'Andrewpur' after St. Andrew of Scotland but for the indigenous people it was "Hamiltonabad". Sir Daniel planned to mine gold from the rich clayey soil and invited anyone who was willing to live and work together: "to build a new society, a new kind of country...a country run by co-operatives...to build a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences. He dreamed of a place where men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening" (HT,51-53).

Nirmal Bose, the headmaster of Lusibari school and Kanai's uncle, is inspired by the utopian vision: "someday, who knows? It may yet come to be". The young impressionable minds of his students are fertile ground for implanting such thoughts: "I'll teach them to dream"(HT,53,173). He empathises with the dispossessed people of Morichjhapi Island. After retirement Nirmal decides to take up his long-forgotten passion of writing. He writes an account of the struggles of the migrants of this island with the intention to carry their voice to the world at large through his enterprising nephew Kanai. Due

to the vicissitudes of fortune, Nirmal and his wife, Nilima, Kanai's aunt, sought refuge in the Sunderbans. Nilima set up the Badabon Trust, a non-profit NGO headquartered in Lusibari. She dedicates her life to mitigate the sufferings of the people sunk in dire poverty. She founds a hospital and organises other livelihood earning avenues for them. This earns her great respect and the sobriquet 'Mashima', aunt and protector of the vulnerable.

The arrival, in tide country, of the American scientist Piya/ Piyali Roy, and the Bengali businessman Kanai Dutt from New Delhi, set the events in motion. Piya who "had no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things" (HT,35) ends up with a sense of belonging in the Sunderbans. A cetologist who studies marine mammals like whales, dolphins and dugongs, 'Piyali' a fish, settles down in Lusibari Island because "home is where the Orcaella are", the diminishing Gangetic Dolphin species (HT,400). She feels deeply indebted to Fokir her young guide, who died protecting her in the massive storm they encountered in their search for the dolphins. Garnering public sympathy and material support through the Internet she decides to buy Fokir's wife Moyna and his son Tutul a house. Her other plan is to establish a research and conservation centre dedicated to Fokir. During the storm, except for the GPS recorder, Piya lost her backpack with most of her equipment and papers. But Fokir's invaluable knowledge of the water routes has survived the ravages of the storm. It got stored in the satellites connected to her GPS equipment. Empathy goes hand in hand with scientific methods of utilizing traditional knowledge and insights to make the planet a happier place where all creatures will find space for themselves.

Kanai with a command of six different languages has turned his talent and ability into a business opportunity to provide translator and interpreter services to expatriate organizations in New Delhi. Affluent, self-centred, with a sense of entitlement he has a cynical attitude towards the unlettered poor and a predatory attitude to women. Bored with the backwardness of the region he offers to accompany Piya acting as translator to enable her to communicate with her rustic guide, Fokir. Cut off from his party Kanai comes face to face with the dreaded man-eating tiger of the Sunderbans. Subject to the mercy of the non-human and elemental there occurs a transformative moment of reckoning: "At Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world" (HT,353). He is led to a 're'-cognition of his role in society. Nirmal's moving account of the struggles of the 'Bastuhara' people of Morichjhapi Island, and his aspirational dreams of an equitable society motivate Kanai to reorder his life. For Kanai "language was both his livelihood and his addiction" and he finds a higher calling of voicing such

dreams into actionable ideas. The uncanny agency of Nature grants him a second chance and makes him wonder if "the tiger was the only animal that forgave you for being so ill at ease in your translated world?" (HT,328). This cataclysmic event reshapes Kanai's perceptions. Arrogance gives way to humility together with a desire to win the approbation of the 'other': Nature, the poor and women.

In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh writes how on a visit to the Sunderbans he "became aware of the urgent proximity of non-human presences". Though tiger sightings are rare, yet its footprints are proof of its existence: "a tiger is somewhere nearby; and you know that it is probably watching you" (GD, 7,37-38). The folk epic of the Sunderbans, *Bon Bibir Johuranama*, celebrates the miracles of this revered deity Bon Bibi. She together with her brother, Shah Jongoli, battle out the demon, Dokkhin Rai, who disguises himself as the tiger. To Horen Naskor in *The Hungry Tide*, 'jongol korte geslam' or obtaining forest produce for livelihood purposes, cannot be done without paying obeisance to Bon Bibi to seek her blessings and protection from man eating tigers. She is the goddess of the forest and all the animals do her bidding. Fokir reiterates the ancient folk-prayer sung from a pure heart full of love for this "Mother of the earth" (HT,357). Nirmal records the traditional belief in vitalism of nature, how the dolphins are perceived as "Bon Bibi's messengers" (HT,235). Fokir tells Kanai: "Bon Bibi would show you whatever you wanted to know" (HT,323).

Communication between Piya and Fokir was challenging because they had no language in common. Yet they would communicate through gestures and drawings of the dolphin and of the GPS data, and instinctive trust and faith in each other. Fokir's melodious songs would weave magic and bring a sense of contentment to Piya. Perhaps "speech was only a bag of tricks" ---a delusional, divisional isolating means (HT,159). Through his enchanting songs of the Bon Bibi legend, Fokir is able to communicate the perception of the world, the ethical value system governing the life of his people.

Kanai's retelling of the legend of Bon Bibi translated into English is Amitav Ghosh's project to revive the ancient myths which treat the planet as a living entity and to displace the arid construct of it being a resource. The uncanny had beckoned him in the strange way of the lost letters of Nirmal to Kanai resurfacing and in the uncanny encounter with the tiger. Kanai returns to Lusibari to retune his capacities and talents. He combines the love of writing and visionary perspective of Nirmal the poetic dreamer, with the pragmatism of Nilima. Will Bon Bibi hear the cry of distress of the dreamer and his plea for deliverance from the tiger? Perhaps man's creative effort

will overcome the devil of endless appetite and lead to a regenerative ethics and poetics for the world.

Jungle Nama, a Story of the Sunderban is a re-telling of an episode from the folk-epic celebrating the miraculous powers of Bon Bibi, with the text being “illuminated by Salman Toor”. Ghosh illumines how the story of Bon Bibi is “a charter that regulates every aspect of life” of the Sunderban community; it governs their relation to the environment enveloping them (JN, 74). The epic, Bon Bibi Johuranama or the narrative of her glory, is traditionally written in a Bengali verse meter known as ‘dwipodi-poyar’ or ‘two-footed line’ with rhyming couplets. Verses written in this metre are meant to be chanted, sung or read aloud. The episode recounted by Ghosh has the rhythmic cadence of the poyar meter. The graphics transport us to the terrifying beauty of the Sunderban; the verbal and the visual combine to convey the spirit of the Indigenous reverence for life and communitas.

Ghosh’s re-tells the dramatic intervention of Bon Bibi in the life of poor innocent Dukhey exploited by his rich uncle Dhona. Eons ago the people inhabiting the Sunderban, the “vast jungle that joins Ocean and Earth” were terrorized by the evil powers of Dokkhin Rai in his man-eating tiger avatar (JN,1). Their prayers for deliverance were answered when heavenly mercy dispatched “from Araby.... two beings of great power”: the “Mistress of the Forest” Bon Bibi who was “strong, but full of compassion” and her brother Shah Jongoli, an intrepid warrior (JN,3). Together they tamed the devil and confined him within the jungles of the south. By drawing a line demarcating his forests and “the realm of the human” Bon Bibi created a dispensation that brought peace to all beings of the Sunderban: “every creature had a place, every want was met/all needs were balanced...”(JN,6). But the tide of time upsets the balance when greed thrusts its ugly presence. Greed propels Dhona to cross the line into the devil’s kingdom, enabling him to plant thoughts in his victims mind: “the jungle lord spun a web of illusion;conjuring up visions, laden with temptation”(JN,32). Dokkhin Rai fans and feeds on Dhona’s unsatiable desire for riches and in exchange of fabulous wealth demands Dukhey as his prey. Threatened with dire consequences by the inexorable one, Dhona tricks and leaves Dukhey at the assigned place, “Kedokhali....it’s my favoured haunt” and where riches await Dhona for the taking(JN,38). Face to face with the dreaded tiger it is a moment of reckoning for the boy: “It’s not a mere animal, it’s a demonic being” (JN,53). Dukhey recalls his mother’s words how the mangroves are homes to predators of every sort: “some you’ll never see, but they will enter your mind” (JN,20). In this tideland if he is sighted by the “hungry shape-shifter” Dokkhin Rai, he is

to “stand your own ground, don’t run;/every demon, remember, has an ichneumon”. He is to sing out loud an appeal to “Ma Bon Bibi” by composing a prayer cast in dwipodi-poyar, “the meter of wonder” (JN,22-23). On hearing “a fevered cry from a soul about to suffer” the Lady of the Jungle immediately comes to his rescue. She sends Shah Jongoli in pursuit of Dokkhin Rai: this “ever-hungry shadow-stalker” whose “appetites grow strong when humans stoke his greed;/to show him his limits we must stop this misdeed”. Bon Bibi spirits away Dukhey to her own home and with her love and care he recovers, with “each day deepening his reverence for his saviour” (JN,53-55). Dokkhin Rai seeks forgiveness and fearing annihilation pledges to the divine siblings never to yield to temptation. Seating Dukhey on her pet crocodile and showering him immense riches, Bon Bibi restores him to his grieving mother. On Bon Bibi’s advice Dukhey forgives Dhona, thus gifting him a chance of redemption. In turn the uncle arranges Dukhey’s marriage and with Bon Bibi’s blessings he was no longer sad but full of contentment. Dukhey thanks his mother for teaching him about the power of words and how the poetic rendition through “the blessed meter”, dwipodi-poyar, could “make words alchemic” so that they could ascend to heaven and move heavenly power to shower down blessing: “I called out to Bon Bibi, in utmost despair,/and so was I rescued, she heeded my prayer”(JN,68-69).

In the ‘Afterword’ Ghosh explains the core of this narrative is about “the ideas of limiting greed, and of preserving a balance between the needs of humans and those of other beings”. The stories of forest peoples across the globe are replete with such perceptions and “these are essential values for this era of planetary crisis” (JN,77). In the tiger stories of the Sunderbans and his own experience of being ‘beheld’ by elemental forces he has come face to face with the uncanny power of Nature. The congruence of two nonhuman entities, the Internet App and the coronavirus, opened up possibilities despite the immobilization of lockdown, to journey into the past and cull out material for his profoundly stimulating narratives (NC,18).

Jungle Nama is an illuminated text in the manner of pre-modern books which contained pictorial elements, frontispieces, portraits, miniatures, elaborate borders, colouring, line drawings and such like. With the proliferation of the printed book, illustrations became taboo; the hegemony of the word drowned the visual Imaginative. The illuminations done by Toor renew our cognition that man is but one element among others in “a codex that had been authored by the earth itself” (HT,269). Text and image complement each other to bring home Bob Bibi’s message: “You must stay within your bounds and

never transgress...don't seek excess...find a proper way to speak...by measuring your thoughts" (JN,56).

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes how the landscape of the Sunderbans "is demonstrably alive; that it does not exist solely, or even incidentally, as a stage for the enactment of human history; that it is (itself) a protagonist" (GD ,7-8). Writing with a postcolonial perspective, he begins at the other end of the spectrum of the literary imaginary. He overturns the limiting grid of Realistic fiction genre that has banished the intuitive, the improbable and mysterious to the realm of the unintelligible. Analysing how climate change is a failure of cultural underpinnings of the 'Modern', he reinstates "the archaic voice...of the earth and its atmosphere", of Gaia, of earth as a living entity (GD,166).

Ghosh reads the novel form as one that offers dazzling scope for exploration of the new: "the novel can do anything. I see it as the overarching form. I don't see it necessarily as fictional; I think it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the present, the past. There are no limits to a novel, nor are there any rules to a novel...it doesn't have any borders" (Chambers 32-33). For Ghosh the novel offers a platform to challenge the existing paradigms and preoccupations of Nature-Culture divide. The aridity of the purely rationalistic, the prosaic materiality of life enshrined in the realistic novel have cast premodern native traditions of story-telling as "primitive" and banished them to "generic outhouses" labelled as the 'Gothic', 'romance', 'fantasy' or 'melodrama' and 'science fiction'. Castigating this division of the scientific and imaginative by the arrow of capitalism in its blind eye trajectory of 'progress', Ghosh rues the loss of intuitive perceptions, the mystery and magic of Nature as an "energy that surrounds us" an enveloping presence "that may have its own purposes about which we know nothing" (GD,6-7). Cataclysmic changes wrought by climate change due to global warming and rising sea-levels threaten to drown the river and sea-facing cities built by the white colonizer. Thereafter future generations visiting museums will search for the cultural markers of Art and Literature to get insights into such deranged activities of interference with the ecology. The literary imaginary must grapple with this challenge.

The contemporary writer must break free from this rigid "grid of literary forms and conventions" by the insertion of "a yet undiscovered vein", the improbable, of the inexplicable power of Gaia (GD,9,20). A sentient planet "our earth" has become "a literary critic" mocking such reductionist Realism which denies her presence and agency (GD,35). Nature speaks in 'uncanny' ways: when journeying on the Padma, "the river seems to meet my eyes, staring back" seeking recognition of its entity; during

the devastating Delhi cyclone he felt the tornado's eye pass directly over him "beholding and being beheld" as if in visual embrace of the mysterious and the uncanny (GD,5,19). 'Seeing', 'recognition' and 'communication' are key motifs in Ghosh's narratives. He perceives how nature has communicated through "the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors" to refute and reject the Enlightenment discourse based on Cartesian dualism of body and mind and intellectual arrogance of the human species (GD,40). Weird unpredictable weather conditions of cyclones, typhoons, wildfires and drought, floods, copious rain, the unleashing of catastrophes are the new normal and should jolt us out of our smug complacency and demand immediate mitigatory action. Such interventions by non-human agencies should make us recognize that the human does not control the universe: his ownership of the planet is illusory. Nature seems to be watching us but is there a forum to involve this voice of the spirit world and engage with it? The collective consciousness has been excluded from the political, economic and novelistic domains in favour of narrow individualism. This perspective is upheld as a modern progressive concern but the "sly critic", inexplicable Gaia, will have the last laugh about such ideas of liberty and advancement. Global warming is a collective problem and needs an imaginative response. The "stirrings of the earth" have made us "rethink" about human identity, consciousness and agency (GD,160). For the creative writer, the genre of the novel offers uninhibited scope to weave magic suggestiveness, to revitalize our imaginative life and cultural roots. It could give utterance to the voice of Nature where the subalterns of Sunderbans believe the tiger possesses intelligence; where glaciers have moods and feelings for the people of the Yukon; where an Indian scientist Sir J.C.Bose attributed consciousness to vegetables and even metals and where a primatologist, Imanishi Kinji, is firm in his belief of the unity of all elements—living and non-living on this planet: the story of "the interconnectedness of Gaia" (GD 75). He envisages the novel as inherently offering a vast perspective to engender dreams, to evoke the magic and mystery of the environment enveloping us, a renewed apprehension of meaning, encapsulated in the 'bhūmisparshamudra' of the Buddha in Burma. The tip of the middle finger of the Enlightened One rests on the earth suggesting a language of thought and renewal beyond the word. The language of communication incorporates gesture, instinctive apprehensions and even silence.

To get rid of the label of 'backwardness', the '-isms' of modern art and literature were eagerly embraced by writers in Asia, Africa and the Arab world. Ghosh acerbically comments that modernity "rendered other forms of

knowledge obsolete” and the fantastical, miraculous and adventurous elements of the Urdu ‘Dastan’, the Sanskrit narratives, the Buddhist ‘Jataka’ tales were rejected. Rationalism and gradualism were the favoured Western modes and worldview which replaced the catastrophism of native, indigenous literatures. Ghosh desires to reinstate “the archaic voice whose rumblings, once familiar”, but now “become inaudible to humanity: that of earth and its atmosphere”. He questions whether the ‘avant-garde’ is really ‘ahead’ in its leap “from the figurative towards the abstract”. Clearly, he deduces it to be a “laggard” in its appraisal of life and it is time to “rethink” about the power and possibilities of art and literature, especially the novel (GD166-7). In an interview to Alessandro Vescovi, Ghosh goes beyond structured knowledge: “people can achieve deep insights through other forms of knowledge...the novel is one of those forms of knowing...of exploring possibilities, of exploring Truth” (133-134)..

III. CONCLUSION

In an interview to the UN Chronicle, Ghosh opining about literature in a globalized world, differentiates between “shallow communication” as in e-mails and such daily transactions and a “deeper, resonant communication”. In Milan Kundera’s view the novel “is a place where the imagination can explode as in a dream” and throw out the “termites of reduction”, its servitude to temporality and verisimilitude (Kundera,16-17). Ghosh rues the fact that the novel as well as politicians of the day are concerned only with identity politics, an agenda of ‘baring- of-soul’ rather than serious issues of collective interest; a spectacle-making rather than entering into meaningful dialogue with stake-holders and which has led to a deadlock in the moral-political sphere. It is for the creative writers and artists to find a way out of this deranged individual-centric view point and ‘omnicide’. The novel offers scope for the imagination to range over vast dimensions of the mysterious and the improbable, to creative dialogue with “the environmental uncanny” and envision our relationship with our environment (GD,42). Empowered by “this vision, at once new and ancient” of our “kinship with other beings”, a recognition of “the idea of the sacred”, a reverence for all life forms, humanity, the collective family of the wide world, will lead us onto a path of transformation and renewal (GD,215-217).

Like his fictional character, Nirmal Bose, Amitav Ghosh too desires that his writing “leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (HT, 69). Translating these extraordinary perceptions of “the stirrings of the earth” with shamamic intensity into his narratives, Ghosh makes us rethink of the possibilities of human enterprise,

re-cognition, a “renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself” (GD 160, 6). Though written largely from the perspective of Postcolonialism, ultimately an international vision prevails. His concern is to embrace ‘Humanism’ of the highest order, to create a ‘mohona’ of common concerns and a common language that speaks the collective well-being of all life on this planet.

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