Interweaving Ecohorror and Symbiotic Associations

The Posthuman Aesthetics of Sundarbans in Selected Works of Amitav Ghosh

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Sundarbans portray a world that is non-anthropocentrically hybridised with frequent human-wild engagements as part of daily survival. Amitav Ghosh aptly highlights the (multi-layered) dual character of Sundarbans, surfacing the perilous yet intimate bond between the human and the natural world, evoking ecological horror as well as awareness among the anthropocentric realm. The paper focuses on the islander's struggle to survive in the complexities of such landscapes in the backdrop of region's rich socio-cultural history as depicted in his ecological texts – *The Hungry Tide, Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* that simultaneously overlap ecohorror with symbiotic interfaces. Using posthumanist ecohorror as a theoretical framework for study, the paper argues how Ghosh's illustrations of different environmental catastrophes and conflicts in the frame of region's cultural belief systems form a posthuman aesthetic that enables to live symbiotically despite oppressive political establishment and precarious circumstances. | *Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate, Ecohorror, Nature, Posthuman, Sundarbans*

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has been one of the powerful voices in the domain of environmental writing in the past few decades. His recent nomination for the Nobel Literature Prize explicates his theoretical position in the international stage where his voice stands emblematic for decelerating environmental degradation influencing members lobbying for his award in speaking against the capitalist forces. Ghosh's argument that the climate crisis is not just political or economical but are entailed to a more nuanced routinely human actions stretching to spiritual and psychological forms echoes strongly in his writings. His focus on evoking environmental awareness by highlighting both the present ecological crisis as well as catastrophic imaginings through the mediums of fictional and non-fictional narratives

suggest ways to the posthuman consideration of interconnecting relationships between humans and the non-humans and the roles they play. Ghosh's use of multi-genres allows him to address the blind spots in mainstream literature by capturing it through different emotions that a single genre cannot fully contain. In prose, he uses the language of rationality to incorporate detailed and research-heavy narratives demonstrating intellectual intensity and evoking awareness, while his fictions blend historical facts with imagined stories to make complex historical events accessible and arrest the attention of the readers. The poem connects to a more emotive response, creating an immersive sensory experience using melodic lyrical style and vivid imagery. His multi-genre approach serves a more holistic understanding of human societies, reflecting on different intricacies, making him viable as a literary-writer critic and a climate activist.

Ghosh's 'climate' texts feature non-human forces such as rivers, animals, plants, and the landscape contributing a significant role in unravelling of the plot and sometimes act like protagonists influencing each other's lives. Likewise, Sundarbans has been a crucial focal point in many of his works – *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019) and *Jungle Nama* (2021) – to showcase this intermingling relationship between people, land, animals, water and various life forms surviving in a mutually conflicting yet cohabited environment. *The Hungry Tide* explores the complex relationship between human and the natural world by situating its characters in the Sundarbans and the challenges that this terrain presents.[1] Delving into the violent history of the region – the 1979 Marichjhapi incident as a powerful backdrop, the novel forays the crucial aspects of ecological degradation, exploitation of subaltern communities and cultural identity by switching to and fro between the past and the contemporary in showcasing the plight of the refugees in midst of environmental horrors. *Gun Island* is a sequel to *The Hungry Tide* that employs the folktale of Manasa Devi in connecting threads with present-day planetary changes with predatory capitalism. *Jungle Nama* is a graphic verse adaptation of an episode from the legend of Bon Bibi (a divine protector of the forest) whose tale illustrates the victory over excessive materialism through her clash with Dokkhin Rai (the lord of the tigers), implicating environmental balance, justice and coexistence. The expanse of time from the publication of *The Hungry Tide* in 2004 to his other two texts in 2019 and 2021 consecutively surrounding various issues focalising on Sundarbans explicate the accelerating pace of climatic breakdown that the terrain manifests. Ghosh shows how the Sundarbans enacting as a microcosm to the vulnerability of the Earth had inclined towards greater deterioration as a result of the capitalist-infested corporatisation raising significant ecological concerns. By coming back to the same milieu after a decade and further employing a storytelling verse technique of an ancient folktale through a language targeted to global readers, Ghosh seeks to raise environmental consciousness, emphasising on the traditional ecological wisdom to show how the crises are more evident than ever.

[1] For more information on Sundarbans see these websites: About Sundarbans (no date) and Sarkar (no date).

Sundarbans thus serve as a crucial context in these texts foregrounding the human impact on the fragile environment, symbolising the wider planetary ecosystem and addressing global climate issues by utilising a multispecies lens.

The paper attempts to delineate the dual character of the landscape as portrayed by Ghosh in his Sundarbans trilogy – *The Hungry Tide, Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* by highlighting its ecological horrors and forms of symbiotic existence of different forms of life. It specifically focuses on the native's struggle to survive in the complexities of the land, underpinning sociopolitical power structures and simultaneously forging a close bond with nature as part of their lived experiences. Using posthumanist ecohorror as a theoretical framework for study, the paper argues how Ghosh's depictions of different environmental catastrophes and conflicts in the backdrop of the region's rich socio-cultural history amalgamates to form a posthuman aesthetic that conduces to live symbiotically despite perilous conditions.

2. The Tidal Labyrinth: Ecological Grief and the Fight for Survival

Sundarbans- the world's largest mangrove forest boasts of being home to vast biodiverse species of plants and animals and is known for the Royal Bengal Tiger whose haunting existence has led many writers to write about and create enthralling literatures surrounding its uncanny engagement with human souls and settlements. *Marginlands* (2023) by Arati Kumar Rao- a deep exploration of India's ecological borderlands- rivers, deltas, deserts, mangroves documents how climate impacts influence people's livelihoods. Through narrative immersion, photography and sketchers, Rao places the survival struggles of slowly vanishing and often unrepresented ecologically sensitive zones and marginalised communities at the centre of environmental understanding. *Marginlands* and *The Hungry Tide* connect through their ecocritical aesthetic to show how the environmental disruptions are intrinsically related to the questions of justice and human welfare, viewing ecology as both relational and political. In describing the fluid landscape of Sundarbans, Ghosh states that it has no constricted boundary and is "always mutating, always unpredictable [...] a forest that is a universe unto itself" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 7). Its dynamic environment owing to the effect of tide, flooding and cyclones makes it highly vulnerable for the meeting ground of human-nature interface. The precarious tide showcases this vulnerability of the biotic sphere with frequent cyclones in the area bringing about inundation, salt-water intrusion and the rising of the sea-level. As Nayar (2010, p. 98) points out, the land is always changing its state (sometimes land, sometimes water) and is unstable, evolving and open-ended with multiple originary flows. The terrain changes invariably offering for the multiple confluences of land with rivers, and humans with the non-human realm on a daily basis.

As an ecologically fragile forest, Sundarbans face escalating climatic threats and drives significant anxiety among its inhabitants. Ghosh's literary engagement with climate change anxiety or eco-anxiety takes different tropes

with the characters. In *The Hungry Tide*, he historicizes the environmental distress through the character of Kusum whose loss is mediated by political violence. She recalls how her family and others were evicted from Marichjhapi in the name of conservation "whole world has become a place of animals, and our crime [...] is trying to live as human beings from water and soil" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 262). Her anxiety emerges as rage and grief, experiencing a politicised climate anxiety intensified by institutional power as well as a feeling of permanent insecurity amidst environmentally volatile livelihood. Fokir, by contrast, embodies ecological belonging that "lives in him and... plays a part in making him the person he is" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 354), mitigating anxiety through familiarity and acceptance. His knowledge about Sundarbans is experiential, living in deep symbiosis with rivers, tides and animals but also well aware of its precarity. Through his death, Ghosh showcases the dark reality of ecology that even intimate belonging cannot protect subaltern lives from climate-driven violence. Climate anxiety for the vulnerable populations in an ecologically unstable and politically unequal world is a structural condition of life, functioning as an ontological exposure rather than individual psychological state.

Climate change anxiety is embodied in a more conscious and literary manner in *Gun Island* as a multi-layered condition, experienced differently by the characters yet rooted in a shared planetary disturbance. Piya, a marine biologist, who understands climate data and fears its intensity represents informed or knowledge-based eco-anxiety, remarking how changes have a "scientific explanation [...] and we'll see more of intersecting events in the future" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 284). She carries the burden of anticipatory foresight, knowing what is coming but lacking adequate means of intervention and power to prevent it. Ghosh uses Deen to dramatise how climate change unsettles modernity's rationality and control reflecting an anxiety of intellectual disorientation and a crisis of understanding, "an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream [...] and become a part of it" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 208). Tipu, a young migrant from Sundarbans articulates the anxiety as a forced mobility of losing home and identity through slow unmaking of his place "both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans itself" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 49), signaling a collapse of ecological stability. He exhibits the signs of solastalgia – a feeling of distress and homesickness produced by environmental degradation while one continues to reside it (Albrecht, 2005, p. 48), transforming into an existential and corporeal anguish. As climate change has eroded their future possibility of livelihoods, migrants like him are compelled to displacement with quiet resignation. He confronts the loss of inherited land as irreversible, revealing how climate change is capable of producing (collective) homelessness, often disproportionately affecting the poor, eroding not only economies and ecosystems but also the emotional foundations of place and identity. The continuous shifting and precarity of the landscape provide for the conception of the geographies of terror where humans' vulnerability comes to the forefront due to the haunting of spaces by wild creatures, demons or ghosts (as recorded through the region's myths and mythologies) attuning with the community's daily livelihoods.

3. Fear, Horror and Violence: Scenes of Anthropocentric Ecohorror

The anxiety multiplies with the frequent human-wild conflict in the Sundarbans that have increased as the result of rapid extension of humanised landscape, challenging the human speciesism and causing fears in them. The tension between the human bodies and the violence of the creatures that inhabit the wild construe ecohorror in the anthropocentric realm. Ecohorror, as defined by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles (2021, pp. 3–14) is a fear by and for nature reflecting the terraformed state of our planet that poses threat to the entire human existence caused by the humans themselves. The human fears about the natural world exemplifies in the "nature strikes back" narratives that evoke and explore this unsettling relationship of human anxieties with the wild and culminates to promote wider ecological crisis and awareness. Sundarbans becomes an important context where fear and ecohorror habitually functions with human bodily engagement emerging as a potential site for power discourse. The liminality of its peculiar geography reinforces the natureculture continuum (Haraway, 2016) with different dimensions of intermingling existence associated with religious and cultural beliefs, social and political marginalisation.

The Hungry Tide and *Gun Island* present manifold illustrations of interacting with less than positive ways of human-wild conflict. Frequent encounters with snakes and tigers (portrayed as mythological symbols) compose a crucial motif in Ghosh's texts to foreground climatic distress. As Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* stumble upon a snake- "a ropelike tendril wrapped itself around his ankles as though the earth had come alive" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 325); Tipu in *Gun Island* got bitten by a king cobra while trying to save Deen who was awestruck with its appearance "its tongue flickered as I looked into its shining black eyes, and I became aware of a growling sound (Ghosh, 2019, p. 77). In another instance Lubna describes how her brother got killed while they had to take shelter in a tree full of snakes hanging around the branches during a cyclone (Ghosh, 2019, p. 160). The author states how "every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 8) in the archipelago with landmass slowly declining by exacerbation of climate impacts. Timothy Morton (2007) argues how human relationship with nature cannot be always therapeutic or pleasurable as the Romantic writers, prevalent in Europe and America during the 19th century imagined it to be, advocating for a rethinking of nature with multifaceted dimensions. The unsettling and complex realities of existence involving death, decay and contamination arises from embracing the uncertainty of ecological entanglement that is often chaotic and unaesthetic. Through dark ecology, living in coexistence becomes crucial where humans are not seen as superior but as one entity among many, dissolving any form of binaries. Humans are intertwined with (dark) ecology and require it for sustenance but the opposite does not hold true (Horvath, 2024, p. 19).

The realisation of dark ecology manifests itself in the chapter *The Wave* of *The Hungry Tide* where Piya and Fokir were caught in a fierce gale on their small boat,

> A tidal wave sweeping in from the sea; everything in its path disappeared as it came thundering towards them […] the water raged around them, circling furiously, pulling at their bodies as if it were trying to dismember them […] Rain felt more like pellets […] The colour of the sky was even darker and the lashing rain had churned the earth into mud […] the island was entirely submerged with few thickets of trees visible above water. (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 383–388)

Despite fighting desperately against the storm by clinging to each other for survival, the intensity of the wave destroyed everything that came its way (Fokir eventually losing his life in trying to protect Piya). The gale signifies the untamed power of nature in the Sundarbans and its refusal to be controlled or categorized by humans. Moyna in *Gun Island* recounts how the cyclone Aila in 2009 had long-term devastating effects on the land sweeping away miles of embankment making the once fertile land uncultivable because of salt water intrusion (Ghosh, 2019, p. 48). Natural calamities remind human species as entangled with ecological meshworks inseparable from material world where nature is around as well as within us (Bigelow, 2023, pp. 18–19). The entangled meshwork of humans with the natural world challenge the traditional view of humans as outside or superior of the plant and the animal kingdom that gave a ground for exploiting it at will, disregarding both their positive and negative engagements in shaping the planet exclusive of human intrusion.

The changing terrain of Sundarbans is both natural and man-made. Although frequent storms and cyclones modify the landscape every year causing natives to displace from their dwellings, man-induced environmental alterations have led to increased vulnerability in climate change and degrading the forest's ecosystem. The wildlife is converted into a resource for generating profit- the tourism industry and the prawn farming of Sundarbans have been economically beneficial for the government as well as the people but the overconsumption have been adversely affecting the ecosystem drastically. "Nylon nets used to catch prawns are so fine that they catch the eggs of other fish as well […] banning of nets was impossible because there's a lot of money in prawns and the traders had paid off the politicians" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 134). Additionally, prawn farming causes deforestation as large parts of mangrove forests are required to be cleared off to create ponds for its cultivation. This destabilises coastal zones and induces soil erosion, water pollution, salinization and disease outbreak often displacing the local communities from their traditional livelihood of agriculture. The consequences are not immediate but contribute a significant part in enacting a slow violence (Nixon, 2011) of delayed destruction of land and its people. The functioning of capitalism entwinning with the ecohorror of what has been done to Earth suffices an important way to understand ecological crisis and broader planetary terraforming (Wallin and Sandlin, 2024, pp. 93-94). Ghosh criticises the incentivising of exploitative practices that upset the balance of the natural cycle. This denotes the human corporate instinct seeking to control nature for the fear of uncertainty, reiterating the duality of dependence and conflict in a fragile ecozone. The laws of nature are often not obeyed by the landscape,

indifferent to anthropocentric interventions and therefore steady community-based adaptation efforts help locals to cope with its multifarious hostility.

3.1. The Politics of Wildlife Preservation: Exploring the Human-Animal Relation

The human-tiger ecohorror takes a centre stage in *The Hungry Tide* where Ghosh subsequently highlights how human lives in the Sundarbans have been systematically devalued and disregarded in favour of conserving endangered tigers, underpinning the politicisation of socially marginalised outcasts. The violent history begins with the migration of lower castes East Bengal refugees to the Marichjhapi island of Sundarbans in 1979. In *Blood Island* (2019), Deep Halder describes how people were betrayed by the then Left Front government who promised them shelter but brutally exterminated them once it came to power. Halder documents the story through his interviews with survivors and asserts it as one of the worst massacres of post-Independent India claiming lives of ten thousand and above through rape and murder. Their ostracisation for being outsiders as well as belonging to the inferior caste solidifies the narrative of nature preservation where any horrific action done against them is legally justified and excused. The experience of environmental racism through violent histories of social discrimination and inequitable access to resources link to the "environmentalism of the poor", fighting for basic rights where the environment is a chief source of livelihood and an inseparable part of their continuing survival (Martinez-Alier et al., 2017, pp. 202–203). Stern practices to save tigers in the pretext of nature conservation while neglecting the basic facilities and well-being for the migrants poses an existential question of belongingness of home/lands for (non)human inhabitants.

> Kusum: Island has to be saved for its trees, animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world [...] I wondered who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 261–262)

Ghosh portrays many such carnal visualisations that displays horrifying but essential part of human survival in the land. Kusum's father was lethally attacked by the tiger- "his bones cracking as the animal swiped a paw across his neck, dragging the corpse into the forest" (Ghosh, 2004, p. 109) when he went to catch fish on the shore of a narrow creek. The episode of setting the tiger on fire because it entered the human settlement killing two people; with locals enjoying the spectacle and Piya trying to vehemently stop them risking her own life exemplifies the difference of perspectives of locals (insider) versus the foreigner (outsider). The locals in injuring the tiger, making it incapacitated and seeing it burn undergo a sense of purgation from their daily trauma of uncertain deaths caused by tigers whereas Piya being a nature enthusiast looks at it as a grave crime committed against the voiceless. The surge in the disturbing encounters with the man-eating tigers of Sundarbans that kill over a hundred people every year not only amplifies horror and detest in the heart of natives but also lead to an increase

in the number of 'tiger widows'– a category of marginalised women who are blamed for their husbands' deaths and are wholly excluded from society. Ghosh rather than probing into the conditions of the widows often living in penury, diverts his attention to the broader repercussions of ecological degeneration and crisis precipitated through human interventions and actuated by greed. The ecohorror becomes political not only by exploring the destructive impacts of ecological crisis but also through scrutinising the limits of (human) ethical and moral structures, engaging speculatively with the environment (Doane, 2020. pp. 47–49).

> Kanai: If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers as these people are too poor to matter [...] Isn't that a horror too – that we feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings? (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 300–301)

In *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), Imbolo Mbue explores the devastating impact of an American oil company set up in the fictional African village of Kosawa critiquing the unchecked global capitalism and corporate greed. The novel highlights the corrupting influence of the oil company Pexton that for decades have contaminated the land and also speaks about the failures of villagers' long acts of resistance and fight for environmental justice. Initially evoked as a fertile, self-sustaining village, Kosawa is gradually transformed by oil extraction into a space of toxic ruin – polluted land, poisoned water, dead children, and bleak futures. Through the conflict, the writer explicates the power struggles and the ongoing impact of neocolonialism where external structures, backed by governmental collusion overlook human and ecological welfare and inflict injustice. The fictional village functions as an allegorical collective, enabling Mbue to politically safeguard against backlash and transform singular tragedy into a global indictment of systemic petro-capitalism. Like Ghosh's imagined Sundarban villages inflicted by neocolonial influence, Kosawa becomes a symbolic ecology where environmental ruin exposes deeper histories of colonialism, resistance and moral choice. Ghosh brings to the surface the neo-colonial outcome and the problematic dualism of brotherhood-enmity of man-tiger conflict in *The Hungry Tide*, making it analogous to its characters who are either rooted to their socio-cultural milieu (Kusum, Fokir, Moyna), or is deviated/ unable to comprehend the complexities of the land (Piya) and those who try to bridge this 'nature-culture' gap (Nirmal, Nilima, Kanai), highlighting the agonies of people inhabiting the land and turning survival into a site of political struggle. However, the natives in the novel have not been accorded proper voice to articulate their hardships. The characters – Kusum and Moyna have concise dialogues or speeches to express with Fokir being almost silent. The major part of the novel is conveyed through the diary entries of Nirmal and conversations between Kanai, Piya and Nilima who sometimes also speak on their behalf. This conscious silencing of the natives by the writer speaks of the absence of the reality of caste anomaly while also underscoring the difficulty that seems to imply that although subalterns can have a powerful presence in the plot, they are almost always incapable of triggering a transformation

or fostering a radical reform in society. Parallel to this aspect is the human-tiger power dynamics functioning in the territory according greater force to the animal due to socio-political structures making the natives doubly subdued and silent. The effect of this conflict awakens a political consciousness among the readers, oscillating between empathy and discomfort that prevents easy moral closure. The readers find themselves in a state of moral unease in which neither the killing of humans or tigers is ethically justifiable, thus creating a space of undecidability.

The politicisation of nature preservation through the instrumentalisation of tiger creates a double dispossession of the islanders by restricting their access to land resources and state participation. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh defends the marginalised position of the islanders who grapple with the menace of man-eating tigers, critiquing the rules and laws created for animal welfare and social exclusion. However, in *Jungle Nama* there is a shift of perspective from nature as a potential threat to an interconnected equilibrium that requires to be restored against the destructive consequences of human greed. He picturises the tiger as an uncontrollable and fatal force (*The Hungry Tide*) juxtaposing with the symbol of artistic energy (*Jungle Nama*) showing how human-animal conflict are different expressions of same life in the planetary existence. The increased capitalist activities functioning in the region made visible through the exacerbating effects of climate change had allowed Ghosh to prismatically view different aspects of the same problem through the years where greed acts as a primary driver for human interference with the natural cycle that he feels should be curtailed. The break-even point of his activist thinking develops through the dynamic changes taking place in the Earth with continuous failures of climate summits and policies in the age of Capitalocene where every effort to rehabilitate the climate is being fuelled by the profit motive Western structures of governance. By reconciling materialism and ecology (eco-materialism) in the texts, Ghosh presents Sundarbans as a space where ecological, social and economic struggles are inseparable, vocalising for the survival of both ecosystem and the marginalised communities by advocating vernacular environmentalism in strengthening ecobalance and local resilience against ecohorrors.

4. The Other side of the Ecohorror: Social Mythos and the Symbiotic Associations

The carnal geography of Sundarbans being dangerous, uncanny and mystical, overlaps negative emotions of the geographies of terror with positive responses with the nonhuman realm. In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya recalls how crabs continuously help in cleaning the debris of the mangrove left behind by the tide

> The crabs form a fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass and constitute the keystone species of the entire ecosystem. And, as lifeforms that keep the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris [...] they enable further life. (Ghosh, 2004, p. 142)

The bioluminescent event in *Gun Island* with dolphins revolving around the boat presents a mystical atmosphere highlighting nature's unpredictable yet aesthetically animated process, and representing the mysterious connection between all forms of life through a natural phenomenon.

The mangrove forest is the quintessential life survivor for its inhabitants and the earth at large forming a natural barrier to storm surges and erosion. Its dense root systems store huge amounts of atmospheric carbon dioxide, reducing greenhouse gases and building strong resilience against climate impacts. For the inhabitants too, the forest is the site for sharing and brotherhood in contrast to the land that is politically hierarchical. As Jalais contends, the forest equalises and levels people of different religious sects and between animals whereas the precepts of the land segregates the deprived (Jalais, 2010, pp. 29–37). The rivers too symbolise man's complicated, dualist relationship with nature. The rivers divide the human realm from the animal but also acts as a pathway in shaping the terrain by erasing the borders of land and sea and distinctions between humans and nature. Many rivers converging with the sea providing for a biodiverse ecosystem represent the inseparability of humans with the natural environment with the flow of the tide resonating to the constant fluidity and transition of the landscape, challenging fixed boundaries of land and identity. The entire landscape echoes strength and vulnerability, spiritual sustenance and its adaptability for constant change.

Mythology weaves a strong hold into the socio-cultural fabric of Sundarbans that inculcates an environmental ethos and a guidance for living in harmony among the communities. Snakes and Tigers are important metaphors employed by Ghosh to imbricate the mythological symbols and its connection with human and more-than-human world by associating with the region's socio-cultural history. Goddess Manasa Devi and Bon Bibi are idolised in the form of snakes and tigers respectively that are widely found in the land and are worshipped to appease and protect the islanders from their attack. Bon Bibi- the reigning spirit of the mangroves symbolises this intermingling of the swamp and the forest brought about by the human intervention who is recognised by all the inhabitants acquiring this space (Chatterjee Sarkar, 2017, p. 52).

> They drew a line, to mark a just separation,
> between the forest, and the realm of the human.
> To Dokkhin Rai was given the jungles of the south,
> where land and water mingle, at the river' mouth.
> No human would come there, nor could he go outside
> […]
> Thus did Bon Bibi create a dispensation,
> that brought peace to the beings of the Sundarban;
> every creature had a place, every want was met.
> (Ghosh, 2021, p. 6)

Through *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh allegorises the folktale to politically translate the myth into graspable narrative form, familiarising the readers with its seriousness of intent in a simple yet symbolic diction. The poetic language and

use of specific meter (*dwipodi poyar*)[2] harmonise with the sensory perception of the readers in connecting to a more memorable exercise of folktale reality, that counter western structures of linguistic representations and legitimise subaltern epistemologies often excluded from climate discourse. The syncretic figure of Bon Bibi reflects in the syncretism of the land and cultural ideals that integrate different sects of people while also unifying the human and the nonhuman realm in a hybrid polyphonic space. Mythology reflects the characteristics of specific cultures, codifying the norms and values, and acting as a substructure for framing a narrative basis of religious traditions to bind communities together. The mythical tradition surrounding Bon Bibi worship is honed by rituals to appease the fierceness of tigers while also helping in inculcating a sense of psychological trust and confidence among natives to share the same space with animals backed by an ecological and moral code of respecting nature and resisting greed.

Further, the influence of myth in the lived theological terrain can be elucidated by placing the works in dialogue with Mircea Eliade's mythic structure that strengthens the posthuman existence in the locale. Eliade's (1957) distinction between the sacred and the profane of the reality to understand human's approach to their socio-cultural traditions emphasizes myth's ritual repetition as an ontological universalism. Sundarbans, functioning as a sacred ecology amplifies this divide by strictly delineating this demarcation via mythological beliefs. The belief endorses to sacredly hierophanize tigers and snakes associated with the myths of Bon Bibi and Bonduki Sadagar to manifest the experience of the numinous (divine) and enact a transcendent referent to the primordial settlement. The sacred history act as a repository of ecological memory for the collective unconscious to make sense of their more profane (historical, chaotic) mundane existence. Myth and ritual allow access to sacred time enabling them to periodically escape the anxiety of history and vulnerable condition. For locals, this divide is essential to comprehend the differences between the human and the non-human realm and be wary of any potential interferences that might cause harm, yet the sacred spaces are no longer insulated from the profane. Ghosh asserts how the sacred sites are invaded by profane forces such as capitalism and climate change, acquiring a quasi-sacred power and describing how suffering, displacement and climate catastrophe cannot be ritually erased. He goes beyond Eliade's protective metaphysical dualism in highlighting the redistribution of sacredness across humans, animals, rivers and forests. The character of Deen Dutta from *Gun Island* is archetypal to Eliade's 'homo religiosus', an initial sceptical academic who unconsciously encounters sacred patterns and repeated reappearance of the myth through climate-induced mishaps across different geographies that eventually make him discover meaning and orientation in the chaotic world, connecting profane to the scared. Deen embodies a modern form of homo religiosus, acknowledging mythic meaning within the shared precarity of the Anthropocene, whose experiences perceive the world as alive

[2] *Dwipodi poyar* is a traditional Bengali verse meter, consisting of a couplet where each line typically has 12 syllables (24 syllables in total) and is commonly found in epic poetry and folk tales.

and responsive. The myths are not merely folklores but serve as narratives which organize communal and ethical behaviour. The texts help explain how myth, sacred space and time continue to shape human experience, even within modern and globalized contexts when analysed through the mythological concepts.

The myths and regional folktales embody a cultural discourse of engaging human cognition with its local landscapes and offer new ways of understanding and communicating with animals or other species (Dufourcq, 2022, p. 4). The human bodily engagement with the natural environment enables a transcorporeal, hybridised socio-material landscapes, interspersed with continuous metamorphosis with other corporealities signifies the aesthetic subtlety of networked being and reciprocity in which human lives are immersed (Alaimo, 2010; Strati, 2025). The duality of human existence in Sundarbans is the interplaying of fear and dependence in the face of the helplessness of tiger's energy living in their natural mangrove habitat who had to be appeased to prevent attacks arising from habitat decline and climate change. This co-existence of sharing lives becomes natural through the adjustment mechanism of the natives developing spiritual defence for protection from the wild as well as dwelling in dependency for sustenance.

4.1. The Relational Canny: Aesthetic Sensing in a Posthuman Landscape

The folktales portray a world that is non- humancentric, allowing for the articulation of myriad voices and perspectives and suffices as an alternative way of decolonising hegemonic modern narratives. Folktales therefore emerge as a powerful medium challenging colonial-capitalist requisitions and instead strives for multispecies encounters, entanglements and its embracement. The syncretic tradition of Sundarbans creates a form of posthuman aesthetics in imagining the goddess – Bon Bibi and Manasa Devi as hybrids reigning the wild. The anthropomorphism of goddess is a common practice in India. The story of Bon Bibi suggests that she is intrinsically connected to the non-human realm. Her mother is a deer and she adopts Dokkhin Rai as her son after defeating him. In the island, she is sometimes dressed like a goddess or a Sufi saint. Whereas Dokkhin Rai also takes many forms, he is a tiger-demon for some people and at other times a saviour of his devotees from the man-eating tigers. In the susceptible landscape of Sundarbans, the tiger is at the centre of discourse while the delta and the forest are enmeshed with the lives of the people who are bound together through religious traditions (Biswas, 2020). The human-animal liminality of the deities belonging to the more-than-human worlds instantiates a posthuman extant. Bon Bibi is sometimes sketched as half-human and half-tiger hybrid worshipped in a space that in itself is interspersed with land and water confluence. She organically harmonises to the geographical and anthropological terrain representing the liminality of Sundarbans and the (Dalit) people residing in it. Manasa encompasses an ambivalent character of human-snake hybrid around whose myth and culture draws a fluid border between divine beings, humans and witches capable of communicating to both the worlds (the underworld and the heaven or the human and the nonhuman). "She was a 'voice-carrier' between

two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression" (Ghosh, 2019, pp. 152–153).

The deities synchronise with the cosmologies of human-nonhuman realms in delineating the intertwined macrocosm that people populate. Storytelling of mythologies provide archetypes of human condition and are integral to cultural cohesion and sensitivity to more-than-human world. The tales of Bon Bibi and Manasa as used in the texts of Amitav Ghosh convey the vulnerability of Bengal by capturing the reality of today's environmental picture, showcasing how mythology can be strategically devised in the Anthropocene to reimage post/anti-anthropocentric notions and discourse where non-human forces are focused upon. This entails the posthuman aesthetics and praxis of enacting socio-cultural beliefs in a vulnerable terrain where myths and folktales form an essential part of everyday existence, while also inferring to the problems of sympoiesis and symbiosis of shared living with the wild. Sympoiesis meaning 'making-with' highlights co-creation through continuous interactions between multi-species organisms. The natives' reliance on a shared system involving forest and rivers, adapting to the dynamic mangrove ecosystem with varied conflicts and challenges is a fundamental aspect of sympoietic living in the Sundarbans that defines their existence.

The connecting link between the ecohorror and the sympoietic living are the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of the region that facilitate living in a mutually cohabited space acquired and shared by different beings despite frightening ordeals. The Bengal tigers are an exemplification of the continuous tussle between man and nature that although unleash tremendous fear and violence among the inhabitants yet are revered and worshipped as a protector of the forest and people from the tigers itself. The belief system centred around Bon Bibi representing a syncretic tradition fosters a spiritual framework for social cohesion and psychological resilience to adapt with varied life forms reinforcing collective identity. The native's cultural traditions empower them to live amidst myriad forms of ecohorrors encircling the mangrove and are intricately tied to their essential livelihoods of fishing, agriculture and honey collection.

Posthuman ecohorror redefines aesthetic itself that places at stake the very conditions through which art is perceived from representing nature to enacting ecological entanglement, unsettling classical aesthetics of beauty and sublimity. The conventional forms fracture into hybrid or disintegrative structures to mirror ecological systems invasive of multisensory immersion. Across these texts, Ghosh develops a posthuman aesthetic that decisively foregrounds nature not as a scenic object but an agentic force shaping perception, ethics and narrative. The posthuman ecological aesthetics make a radical shift from human-centred notion of beauty and pleasure towards a relational ontological reality of ugliness, uncanniness, and fragmentation. The Sundarbans exemplifies this wild aesthetics that undoes the perception

of human supremacy and exposes affective entanglement, vulnerability and interdependence. The ecohorror in posthuman aesthetics engages with this sensorial experience by replacing anthropocentric values with multispecies voices entailing fear, uncertainty and decay as core aesthetic principles. The form and language itself become variable and in a state of flux with non-linear plots illustrating uncanny disruptions produced by climate change that defies rational explanation. Ghosh's narrative strategies of employing potent non-human rhythms such as depicting shrieking tidal surges (*The Hungry Tide*), dispersed geography mirroring climate chaos (*Gun Island*) and anthropomorphizing a folk epic (*Jungle Nama*) reveals the collapse of human-centred discourse, authority and structures in response to ideal grand narratives.

The sensory experience in posthuman ecohorror context emerges from an immersive attunement to a more-than-human world, where non/human bodies are ambushed by ecological vulnerability in an unstable terrain. The mangroves distorting geographical and anthropological boundaries, the picturesque detailing of climate events and the portrayal of recurring human-animal conflict extrudes affective disturbance among the characters as well as the readers feeling aesthetically shocked and unsettled. The characters in this liminal space experience the horror as habit where fear is normalised into routine life and is perceived not as shock but as lived aesthetic atmosphere. The local inhabitants like Kusum and Fokir acknowledge storms, tides and tigers as co-inhabitants, not 'monsters', regarding dangers as continuous process. Fokir's death is figurative of ecological repetition in which loss and grief are elemental and expected, rather than exceptional. For outsiders like Piya and Deen, the tide country is the locus of rationalism and scientific measurement, until the ecohorror gradually enters as uncanny and losing epistemic control. The natural calamities feel 'story-like' and beyond reason, language fails, myth becomes materially real and sensory and bodily perceptions turn vulnerable to the occurrences. In *Jungle Nama*, the ecohorror is integrated into moral order and transformed as a mythical aesthetic governed by ritual fear and restraint.

> The tideland forest is a realm of great danger,
> few men know it well, it's no place for a stranger.
> The mangroves are home to predators of every kind,
> some you'll never see, but they will enter your mind.
> (Ghosh, 2021, p. 20)

The posthuman ecohorror in Ghosh's texts is not spectacular terror but evolves as an aesthetic condition (convergent with somatic, phenomenological as well as ethical aesthetics) of unsettled perception of everyday attunement, revealing a world in which humans are not central but embedded within more-than-human forces of relationality.

5. Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh by situating his characters in a local context like Sundarbans shows how the catastrophe as painted in his texts can have an impact on a global scale. The ecohorror espoused by Sundarbans dismantles

humancentric views by depicting terrifying scenarios of manipulation of natural environment mediated by humans themselves that explores potential for new forms of survival. The delta is symptomatic of capitalist aggression which produces wealth through the exploitation of its natural resources, interfering significantly with the natural process through deepening of humanized landscapes exacerbating climate change impacts. Ecohorror thus becomes a posthuman narrative in visualising frightening aspects of anthropocentric consequences and in breaking down of hierarchies towards more hybridised entanglement.

The posthuman aesthetics embraces hybridised, non-human mediated forms of systems and finds beauty in the ongoing processes of change. It deviates from the traditional notions of beauty and acknowledges the wild which does not bind or control. An aesthetically wild landscape like Sundarbans that coalesces to both beauty and peril, affection and enmity, birth and death, creation and destruction are interspersed with multiple nuances of hybridisation and ambiguity, often moving beyond the human limits of sensorial perceptions. Posthuman aesthetics explored through ecohorror as well as sympoietic relationships in the Sundarbans celebrates the gradual collapse of human-centred frameworks while finding beauty in the interaction between humanity and animality (Mendieta, 2024) for possibilities of non-anthropocentric creativity.

Although Ghosh precisely brings forth the underlying intricacies of the islanders' everyday struggles with wild creatures in a hostile landscape that worsens due to political neglect of the authorities, he failed to expiate or challenge this wide gap of socio-cultural fissures that involve oppression. He portrayed the islanders as either illiterate but well informed about their surroundings (Kanai) or educated but powerless to bring substantial change (Moyna), making them impassive to the deteriorating conditions of their livelihoods. In *Gun Island*, however, Ghosh moves beyond to introduce the literary style of magical realism overlooking the ground reality of violence and exploitation although presenting harsh instances of migration and human rights violation (through the characters of Tipu and Rafi) that youths are subjected to in search of employment and better life. The perpetual struggle driven by the existential threats of climate change amplify competition for diminishing resources and puts humans and animals in direct combat for survival thereby questioning the belonging of the land where nature acts as an active impetus overpowering human agency. The practical concerns that Ghosh highlights in his imagined world are exigently rooted into contemporary reality. Although his texts conclude with unresolved futures with larger societal questions often remaining open and alarming, there is a note of optimistic plea for humanity's collective ingenuity in repairing the planet which he loves. In this study of the posthuman aesthetics of living in such ethereal space among heterogeneous entities, Ghosh ushers in the notion of a precarious balance between fear and cohabitation working simultaneously through the lived experiences of the inhabitants. The human-nonhuman entanglement that he gravely focuses upon in his climate texts

sought connection with the posthuman extant of redefining this relationality and sharing of multispecies ecosystems in a wider planetary crisis that sometimes are visibly violent and others mostly imperceptible.

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