



ASSERTING *JUNGLE NAMA* AS A RESISTANCE TO MASTERY AND A NARRATIVE OF ECO-HARMONY THROUGH THE LENS OF LITERARY NATURALISM

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Abstract

The Sundarbans, with its lush, vibrant flora and fauna, particularly the mangrove forest, is an enchanting tract of rich biodiversity which is the home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. The legend of Bon Bibi runs through the Sundarbans, who is the revered goddess of the forest, protecting the local inhabitants from the wrath of nature. Jungle Nama by Amitav Ghosh is a verse retelling of the folkloric myth of Bon Bibi and her response to the call of the innocents. Literary Naturalism unearths the dark side of human life, the deprived, whose living conditions are conditioned by the heredity of birth and the circumstances of environment, determining one's actions. By interpreting Jungle Nama within the framework of Literary Naturalism, the study aims to examine how heredity, the environment, and moment shape human experiences, exploring themes of survival in the wake of mastery and the often harsh realities faced by its characters, thereby situating Amitav Ghosh as a Literary Naturalist. This study intends to contextualize the possibility of generating harmony between the different strata of society, negating the permanency of class hierarchy.

Keywords: Sundarbans, Bon Bibi, Literary Naturalism, Exploitation, Mastery, Eco-harmony.

Introduction

The first Indian writer in English to be awarded the 54th Jnanpith award in 2018, Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956. Amitav Ghosh is one of India's most distinguished and significant writers. His academic career started in Calcutta, and he received his Bachelor's degree in History in 1976 from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, followed by a Master's degree in Sociology in 1978 from Delhi University. In 1979, Ghosh's academic pursuit took him to Tunis, where he got a diploma in Arabic from the Institute Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes. The D.Phil. degree in Social Anthropology served his professional career by being invited as a Visiting Professor of Anthropology across countries and universities, viz., Harvard University, Columbia University, and the University of Virginia. With acclaimed recognition, Ghosh gave to the world a good number of fictional and non-fictional narratives. Some of his fictional works include *The Circle of Life* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Ibis Trilogy* comprising of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), *Guns Island* (2019). Ghosh has been awarded several awards and acknowledgements for his masterpieces. In 1990, he was awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar for his novel *The Shadow Lines*. The Prix Médicis Étranger, one of France's top literary awards, was given to Ghosh for his novel *The Circle of Reasons*. Additionally, Ghosh is the recipient of Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997, as well as his novel *The Glass Palace* was placed with the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-book Awards. In 2007, Ghosh was awarded the Civilian honour of Padma Shri by the Indian Government and was recognized with the lifetime achievement award at Tata Literature Live on November 20, 2016.

Based on scientism, Naturalism focused on reality, which had no ground for anything to be judged on imaginative aptitude. Truthfulness was the prime focus. Penetrating different disciplines, Literary Naturalists, with the turn of the industrial revolution, realized the ill fate of the inhabitants of the lower



strata of society, and hence they started to explore the living conditions of these people driven by the affluent as per their desires. Thus, French novelist Émile Zola first introduced the concept of Literary Naturalism in the 1870s, bringing the term to literary criticism in his preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*, and thereafter it spread to other regions of the world. Literary Naturalism presents the wretched conditions of living due to the intermittent forces of “heredity, milieu, and moment” (Furst and Skrine 71). Top resent the poor living state of suffering humanity, conditioned by the greed of material accumulation of the rich, is the shouldered responsibility of the Literary Naturalists.

Amitav Ghosh’s 2021 verse narrative *Jungle Nama* is composed in the *dwipodia-poyar* (the two-footed line), a verse meter commonly used in Bengali folk literature. Each line, with natural breaks and caesuras, has twelve syllables and the couplets are written in twenty-four syllables. *Jungle Nama*, written in verse meter which is best understood when chanted, sung, or read aloud, explores the legend of Bon Bibi “chosen by Allah to relieve the people of ‘AatheroBhaatir Desh’ or the land of eighteen tides – another name for the Sundarbans — from the growing tortures of a Brahmin sage, a high-caste priest” (Halder, “The Parable of Bon Bibi and “Being” in the Sundarbans”). Bon Bibi, with her brother Shah Jongoli, faced a battle inflicted upon them by Dokkhin Rai, the sage who, with his austere powers, assumed the tiger embodiment. Giving Dokkhin Rai a defeat, Bon Bibi made the tide country safe for human habitation as Dokkhin Rai’s terror ended with him fleeing to the forest, agreeing not to harm any human being. On the contrary, human greed had another major role to play in dismissing the peaceful environment of Sundarbans. Dhona was the rich man who lived in the Sundarbans and was never satisfied with the wealth he had, and so one spring, he decided to go inside the Mangrove, which would be rich in hives and bring back all the provisions. Monu, his brother, who was always satisfied with whatever he had, did not agree to accompany him, but arranged for seven vessels and many sailors and crew, but lacked a lascar without whom the sail would not be possible. Dhona had a cousin, Dukhey, who was very lowly and lived by herding cattle. Dhona, knowing that he would not deny, tried to lull Dukhey with a made-up dream narration and handed over some coins, asking him to give the coins to his mother and join the fleet, which would help him learn the traits of a sailor and earn him riches. Dukhey’s mother knew about Dhona’s greed and was not happy with the bait, but Dukhey was already in the trance of getting wealth, and so agreed to move with Dhona. With Dukhey and the other men, the crew travelled ashore, but to their disappointment, they found nothing at their first stop, the jungle was barren. Disappointed, Dhona took along some chosen men, leaving Dukhey behind, to explore the jungle, and they by mistake entered the territory of Dokkhin Rai, from whose senses nothing could escape. Raged of human entry without offering, Dokkhin Rai started creating illusions of heavily laden honeycomb which would vanish at Dhona’s touch. He sensed foul play. Later, Dokkhin Rai appeared in his dream and asked Dhona to bring him human blood in return for riches from the jungle. Dhona’s greed made him surrender, and as planned, the crew sailed up to Kedokhali. Dokkhin Rai commanded all the bees to gather honey and wax, and the bees laden the vessels with the combs and wax when the men were blindfolded as commanded by Dokkhin Rai. The next morning, as they were departing with wealth-laden vessels, Dhona sent ahead six vessels and planned to take the seventh vessel along with Dukhey. Though Dukhey could sense the demonic greed of his uncle, he heeded to his command. Dukhey was sent to gather firewood, and as soon as he left, Dhona called Dokkhin Rai, keeping his promise. Dhona was praised for all the wealth he brought to the village, but in sadness expressed how Dukhey did not return with firewood and was eaten by the tiger. Dukhey, all alone, saw Dokkhin Rai in his tiger disguise, scared seeing death; he called unto Bon Bibi as his mother had told him to do if in danger. His cry for help immediately reached Bon Bibi. Giving a good chase, Shah Jongoli brought Dokkhin Rai, who was in repentance, and asked for forgiveness. Bon Bibi commanded Dokkhin Rai to



repay Dukhey by making him richer than Dhona. Dokkhin Rai did as was commanded. Hearing Dukhey's mothers wail, Bon Bibi sent Dukhey back, asking him to forgive Dhona, and so returned Dhona.

Literature Review

The Cambridge Companion to Emile Zola(2007), edited by Brian Nelson, explores Emile Zola as the initiator of Literary Naturalism, as Zola added scientific realism to literature, thereby picturing the real society with human behavior being conditioned by the forces of one's heredity and the environment of living. *Naturalism*(2018) by Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine discusses the chronological growth of naturalism before it was finally added to literary criticism in the second edition of Zola's *Therese Raquin* in 1867. It presents the essential features of Literary Naturalism from subject matter to methods of enquiry. Sarita Rani and Monika Chaudhary in "*Jungle Nama: A Tale Urging a Balance Between Needs and Wants Leading to Ecological Balance*" (2023), through ecological consciousness, urge the human population to take up the responsibility of protecting the earth by maintaining a balance between humans and the environment and not prioritizing damage in the name of development. In "An Eco-aesthetical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama: Bonbibibi Myth*" (2023), Ekta Bawa and Rasleena Thakur, through ecocriticism, talk about Bonbibibi's heavenly role in protecting the deprived sections from nature's adversity. Priyanka Bera's "Unearthing slow violence in the Anthropogenic: A study of myth and ethics in Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*" (2024) discusses the interconnection between the human and the non-human world through the lens of the mythic tale associated with the Sundarbans and the corresponding ethics to be kept in mind to maintain the human-ecological equilibrium.

Research Gap and Objectives

Studying through the scholarly works on Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, it appears that most of the work talks about *Jungle Namath* rough the ecological point of view, studies the mythic tale of Bon Bibi, and some discuss the narrative technique of Ghosh. However, the work has not been analyzed from the perspective of Literary Naturalism.

The study will primarily delve into the text and understand it in relation to the theory of Literary Naturalism. The study will focus on the influence of one's heredity, the condition of the milieu, and the situation of living on shaping the living conditions. Additionally, the study will further analyze how harmonious relationship scan be fostered between the different strata of society by exploring the inherent social consciousness intrinsic in Literary Naturalism.

Methodology

The methodology applied is the theoretical concept of Naturalism in literature as propounded by Emile Zola. A close reading of *Jungle Nama* by Amitav Ghosh is taken to understand the working of Literary Naturalism. For in-text references and bibliographic work citing the ninth edition of the Modern Language Association style sheet is used.

Jungle Nama as a Resistance to Mastery

The Sundarbans in the Northern Bay of Bengal cover an approximate area of ten thousand square kilometres and the home to the largest mangrove forest, which serves the residents with diverse supplies and benefits. The mangrove forest serves as the source of sustenance to the residents as they traverse the thick swamps to fetch their daily needs of sustenance. However, the needs, with the growing materialism, have heightened and the human tendency of ascendancy has penetrated deeper into the innocent inhabitants too. This greed of mastery, of gaining riches, causes a divide in the social strata, causing the affluent to cross all limits of subjugation. The lowly inhabitants become the worst



sufferers, and history is a record of all the ills inflicted upon the me great all the ages and periods of societal existence.

Irena Bartáková, in her 2010 work *Naturalism in Selected Works of John Steinbeck*, states that the Naturalists chose poverty, deprivation and squalor for their themes, wanting to face up to reality. They were conscious of the misery of people living in slums and there was often an element of moral indignation that provoked the writers and provided them with an inspiration. (9).

Ghosh in *Jungle Nama*, employing the dwipodia- poyar brings to notion the layers of the social strata where the poor were hard hit due to imposed poverty. Dukhey, who lived with his mother, was living a life of poverty by herding cattle, which hardly earned him a square meal for a day. His life of deprivation was miserably affecting his status in the locality among the residents, and likewise, his name itself spoke of his poverty-stricken, sad life.

“So miserable was this fellow, so rarely glad,
That people called him Dukhey, which means ‘the Sad-Lad.’”

(Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 15)

Born into the glooms of poverty, Dukhey's life became a distressing tale woven by the cruel hands of fate. From a young age, he was cast aside, often regarded as little more than a tattered rag, a symbol of neglect and inferiority. This perception etched deep scars on his spirit, as the weight of being born into a lineage devoid of wealth felt like a heavy chain, binding him to the harsh realities of existence. In a world where affluence often shone like a gold throne, Dukhey's struggles highlighted the stark contrast faced by those whose inheritance was not riches but hardship.

Dukhey's deplorability left him with no choice but to join the crew of Dhona and sail into the “tideland jungle” (Ghosh 16) of Sundarbans, where dangers of the beast of prey, the predators, loomed as against the request of his mother not to go. This helplessness talks of the lack of freedom to live as per ones conditions and environment as Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine state, “[T]he heroic is alien to the scientific view of man: freedom of choice and responsibility for his actions are implicitly denied to a creature determined by forces beyond his control” (51). So Dukhey had no choice but to surrender to the forces of his heredity.

The fate of poverty is brutal for the people living it every day of their lives on one hand, while on the other; it gives aligher hand to the advanced strata of the social structure who start on their journey of mastery and ascendancy. This road to mastery is backed by two factors, viz., greed and authority. The character of Dhona is the mirror reflection of greed and supremacy. Greed makes a humble man its slave. Dhona, as the name itself meant “Rich One” (Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 7), was already the most affluent person with vast wealth in his treasury, yet Dhona's unsatisfied greed made him decide to grab all that the mangrove had because it was brimming with honey and wax, as he said,

“I'll go to the mangroves, seven ships will I hire.
There's much to be had there, I'll take all I can see;
honey, wax and timber, and all of it for free!” (Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 10)



He was not content with all he had in possession, unlike his brother Mona, who had no greed for hoarding more. Greed can make one go to every possible extent, the extent of gaining more at the cost of someone or something else. So did Dhona, when Dokkhin Rai trapped him with bait, a bait to give him all the riches of the jungle in return for the blood of a human by saying,

“What I love best is the taste of human blood;
There’s no scarcer thing in this realm of mangroves and mud.
There was a time once when I hunted far and wide;
All you need do is give up a chosen victim;
I’ll fill your ships with goods if I can but have him.” (Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 35)

The dominance of the rich over the poor, another ill aspect behind the poor fate of the underprivileged, is shown in Dhona’s authority over Dukhey when Dukhey arrives at a suspecting hint about Dhona playing trickery, driven by some demonic force of greed in him, by staying back and letting the six vessels leave for the settlement. Dhona avows his authority and says,

“You’re too green to talk back in a manner so bold;
You should heed your orders and do as you are told.” (Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 47).

The craze to ascend the social ladder is a very common human desire and is the cause behind all evil deeds, and to unearth that is one of the main objectives of Literary Naturalism whereby the Literary Naturalists, through their work “present characters of low social and economic classes who were dominated by their environment and heredity” (Zhang 195). Ghosh in his *Jungle Nama* brought to focus the character of Dhona whose greed to attain as much of riches as he could makes him to become authoritative to the extent of putting the life of his own cousin Dukhey at stake, to the extent of being aware that he would be killed and eaten by Dokkhin Rai whose only intention was to taste human blood. Analyzing *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh, through the lens of Literary Naturalism, tried to bring a resistance to mastery, which can root out the evils of greed and death, making Ghosh a Literary Naturalist.

Jungle Nama as a Narrative of Eco-Harmony to End Exploitation

Greed leading to exploitation needs to be checked. There is to be a measure to stop this dread. *Jungle Nama* high lights the exploitation inflicted by the privileged ascendancy obsessed group of the society who only aimed at self-gratification, dominating the other humanity who are the less fortunate and who are left with no other option but to surrender to the fortunate. This almost acts as the way man has started to subdue nature for their selfish greed and desires to rise above all. This Anthropogenic attitude is at par with the exploitative attitude of the affluent towards the marginalized section of society. The Anthropocene’s severe damage upon nature however, is not returned in rage; rather, nature simply regenerates and rejuvenates, providing endlessly. The observation that arises is at the compassionate turn of nature, which only provides, no matter the intensity of damage meted on it. This raises a moving question: “Is compassion the antidote to end exploitation?” If this is the case, assumptions can be drawn that the evils of greed and self-gratification, causing all wounds on humanity be pacified through compassion.

Dukhey, being of the low social status and living in the grips of poverty, was exploited to the farthest extent by his uncle Dhona. Dhona, taken in by greed, exploited Dukhey at the command of Dokkhin Rai. The moment Dhona kept his promise and brought Dukhey to be taken by Dokkhin Rai as his prey,



Dhona's vessels were filled with honey and wax at the cost of innocent human life, as said Dokkhin Rai to Dhona,

“Look into the holds of your ships; see what I've wrought;
see what a honey'd treasure Dukhey's life has bought.”

(Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 44)

Inhabitants of Sundarbans have a deep-seated belief in Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli, who are believed to be the protector of the local people and “their adaptability to the inhospitable forests” (Sen and Mukherjee, “Bonbibi: A Religion of the Forest in the Sundarbans”). The legend of Bon Bibi narrates the situation when Bon Bibi faced a battle with Narayani Devi, Dokkhin Rai's mother, who was fighting her for power. Narayani fell as the defeat to Bon Bibi and in return sought her forgiveness. Bon Bibi instead “embraced Narayani Devi and called her ‘soi,’ (a term used to signify close friendship between women in Bengal). From that day on the two became close allies and Bonbibi said that the people would worship both of them” (Singhal, “The Story of Bon Bibi”). Thus, compassion won over power.

Dukhey's call for Bon Bibi's help at the wake of being killed by Dokkhin Rai reached Bon Bibi, and Shah Jongoli, after a good chase, brought Dokkhin Rai to her, who forgave him and in return commanded treasures for Dukhey. The cry of Dukhey's mother reached her ears, and she asked Dukhey to return, however, requesting Dukhey

“...with Dhona you must reconcile;
I know you must hate him, and its true he's vile.
But you must forgive him, rascal though he is;
To hate forever is to fall into an abyss.

With your forgiveness, he could search for redemption;
Give him one last chance, please, despite all that he's done.”

(Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 65)

Only with compassion, on Bibi pacified the greed and mistake of Dhona, who repented his folly in search of mastery and riches. Dukhey was no longer sad but lived a life of content, “not downcast but glad” (Ghosh, *Jungle Nama* 69).

Jungle Nama contains a deeper moral message that reflects the social consciousness inherent in Literary Naturalism. It suggests that true harmony can only be achieved when those in power become aware of the struggles faced by the oppressed. This awareness may lead the dominant class to stop denying better living conditions to those lower on the social scale, who are significantly affected by the powerful forces of “heredity, milieu, and moment” (Furst and Skrine 71). Literary Naturalism, therefore, imbues the notion of compassion and harmony in the minds of the subjugating and the subjugated classes to be the remedy for peaceful co-existence and growth, just like living in harmony with the ecology can only provide sustenance.

Conclusion

Jungle Nama, the verse narration by Amitav Ghosh brings to picture how one's condition of living is conditioned by the factors of race, location and the moment of survival. Ghosh deftly, through the characters of Dukhey, Dhona, Dokkhin Rai, Shah Jongoli, and Bon Bibi, explores the role played by fate and the struggle to survive when driven by the ill forces of greed, ascendancy, and exploitation,



aligning to Émile Zola's concept of Naturalism in literature, thus acknowledging Amitav Ghosh as a Literary Naturalist. It has also emerged in the wide spectrum of understanding that the ills of exploitation faced by the underprivileged can be removed by instilling the feeling of compassion and harmonious existence as the most important societal consciousness reflected in Literary Naturalism. The study of social consciousness as a means to remove all barriers between the different strata of social order can be taken up in the future to explore more about the socio-philosophical turn of Literary Naturalism.

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