

## Beyond the Human: Animal Agency and Forest Ethics in *Jungle Nama*

**Nandita Solanki**

Research Scholar,

Department of Humanities,

Delhi Technological University, Delhi-42

[nanditasolanki22@gmail.com](mailto:nanditasolanki22@gmail.com)

### **Abstract:**

This research paper delves deep into the environmental and moral dimensions of Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, focusing on how the text reconceptualises non-human life as conscious, ethically significant and agentic. *Jungle Nama* uses the legendary and mythic landscapes of the Sundarbans to underscore the agency of the forest and its creatures, and to draw attention to the harmful outcomes of unchecked human greed. Adopting an ecocritical lens, this paper employs the theoretical framework of Eduardo Kohn's "*How Forests Think*" and Deborah Bird Rose's "*Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*", along with Val Plumwood's critique of Western dualism, to know how Ghosh constructs an ecosystem that responds, perceives and withstands ecological imbalance, human greed and exploitation. Also, it will examine how characters like Dokkhin Rai, Bon Bibi, and Dukhey are not merely actors or participants in the moral tale but embody deeper ecological structures. Dokkhin Rai, as the forest spirit, Bon Bibi, as the guardian angel of kinship and balance, and Dukhey as a modest and submissive sad lad willing to attune, adopt and humanise rather than dominate, dictate and control. Lev Shestov's existential ecology further enriches and deepens this reading by placing faith and trust in a higher power rather than in logic and rationality, which are means in a volatile environment. Further, this paper draws parallels with contemporary issues regarding Antarctic krill to show the continued pertinence and urgency of the text's warning. Ultimately, this study argues that *Jungle Nama* is an environmental allegory that urges us to reconsider the boundaries between the human and the non-human, culture and nature, and so on. By granting voice, autonomy, and ethical dimension to the forest and its inhabitants, Ghosh invites readers to imagine a world governed not by control but by mutuality, stewardship, and ecological ethics.

**Keywords:** Animal Agency, Environmental Justice, Hyper-separation, Semiosphere, Anthropocene.

***Reimagining the Human–Non–Human Divide***

The Sundarbans, an abode for both animals and plants, constitutes the entire forest and announces their urgency not with resistance but with fire and storms. The Sundarbans cry for help by demonstrating the need to look upon shifting ideas, the trembling forest, the life it encompasses, and the watchful tiger eyes. In this strange, spellbinding place, Amitav Ghosh wrote *Jungle Nama*—a tale not only of human greed and divine justice but also of animal justice, where voices seek to hear in the non-human world. As the climate crisis intensifies, its impact falls directly on non-human beings such as trees, animals, and small species. These flora and fauna are usually voiceless in our social and political systems. Subsequently, they bear the brunt of nature's cruelty. *Jungle Nama*, penned by the famous Indian author Amitav Ghosh, captures the disparity of the Sundarbans and the inhabitants that surround the area. This research paper portrays the non-human disparity and disproportionate burden on the forest and the animals beyond human agency. In her “*Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*”, Deborah Bird Rose (2021), in her non-fiction work, refers to a species called “dingo” representing the native dog that dreams like human beings. “Dreaming” refers to the spiritual and moral connection with the land. However, in *Jungle Nama*, no dog dreams. However, the context here concerns forests, spirits, and bees, and the author describes the forest as it is, as in Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*. Through these lenses, Dokkhin Rai, as the apple of the eye (King of the jungle), is not simply the predator but the eye of the jungle that watches the unclean motives of the people and ultimately acts as a bridge to capture the harmony between rationality, spirituality, and ecology that binds all beings together in the thread of the ecosystem.

**Sentient Forests: *Ecology, Spirit, and Resistance***

Jungle Nama by Amitav Ghosh is a long narrative poem that centres on the tale of the forest goddess Bon Bibi, the rapacious merchant Dhona, the greedy tiger spirit Dokkhin Rai, and a poor lad, Dukhey, and his mother. As the story unfolds, it encircles not only the mythic tale but also conveys a profound message about the importance of each individual and their contribution to the jungle's ethics, thereby underscoring the characters' interdependence. As Bateson (2011) found out, "the key to survival is not just about the species and the individual alone, but the combination of both the organism and its habitat". Ghosh's logic elucidates this instance: when we harm our environment, we harm ourselves, as when we cut down trees, foregrounding the rupture of the natural order. Similarly, we can see the same idea reflected in the characters Dhona and Dukhey. The former represents the archetype of the jungle, which is a symbol of extraction and greed that tries to snatch or take things, and the latter, being an orphan boy, represents faith by not just silently studying the jungle rules, but also by respecting Mother Earth and eventually surrendering to the divine. In this way, Dukhey analyses the danger approaching him and trusts in the higher power that protects him. It is when he expresses his plea and pain, saying, "Save me, Ma Bon Bibi, before I am torn apart" (Ghosh 53).

This plea reflected in Dukhey's survival theory is based not only in controlling the jungle but also in surrendering to the divine; a critic supports the very idea presented here, Lev Shestov, who advocates for the philosophy of "ecological existentialism" ( qtd. in Rose 42) says that just like Western people's obsession with controlling everything without thinking about the repercussions of the jungle, and believing in the fact of control, logic, and greed. In unstable ecologies, "certainty" becomes a kind of violence: it flattens complexity and treats non-human life as a predictable object rather than a living field of relations.

Similarly, we see this in the character of Dhona, who does not believe in any kind of rhythm or jungle rules without understanding them. In contrast, Dukhey does not try to study nature but only the rhythm and pattern of how the jungle works. Additionally, Dukhey embodies the faith and awareness, while Dhona represents the obsession. Bon Bibi also stands as a figure of justice, trying to maintain the decorum of the jungle by punishing the wrongdoings of the bad and favouring the right. It is when Bon-Bibi says about Dhona, "Where will he run?" said Bon Bibi, arms akimbo, 'Brother: he must pay the price of his bravado. He wanted to kill this innocent, this poor Dukhey; bring him back to me, and I will make him pay.' (Ghosh 54-55). *Jungle Nama* thus becomes a fable of justice and of finding kinship with the non-human world by embracing the mystery and uncertainty of the world, where nothing is fixed or certain. While *Jungle Nama* is not merely a retelling of the Bon-Bibi myth, it also foregrounds contemporary issues of climate change. The Sundarbans, described as a place of sudden shifts and unpredictable events, is one of the most climate-vulnerable areas and home to a mangrove forest and the royal Bengal tiger. Each day, as climate change-related catastrophic events increase in areas more prone to cyclones and sea level rise, the animals residing in coastal regions are affected. Ghosh does not directly mention the hurricane in *Jungle Nama* but relates it to the broader context, shaping the forest he constructs through these forces alone.

### **Western Dualisms and Ecocritical Resistance**

The Sundarban forest in *Jungle Nama* is not a place that can be fully controlled or understood. It is full of danger, beauty, spirit, and unpredictability—just like Shestov's idea of real life, full of emotions and change. Characters like Dhona try to dominate the forest with greed and arrogance, believing in the false "Certainty" that they can control nature for profit. However, this leads to

suffering for humans, animals, and the land, just like Shestov warns that belief in certainty leads to destruction. In contrast, Bon Bibi grounds her justice not by strict rules or abstract reasoning, unlike the Western system that Shestov critiques. Bon-Bibi ethics are rooted in kinship, balance, and care, and are grounded in authentic relationships among humans, animals, and spirits. This cultural obsession with detached "truth" and "fixed" meanings reflects the Western worldview.

Westerners can best understand the above idea, as they have long upheld a worldview based on such distinctions. Western thinkers have built their worldview by dividing the world into two opposites: mind vs body, man vs. woman, culture vs. nature, and humans vs. animals. These divisions do not just say that things are different—they often say one side is better, stronger, or more intelligent than the other. The eco-feminist philosopher Val Plumwood calls this extreme separation "Hyper-separation" (qtd. in Rose 47). It means making differences seem bigger than they are and putting one side in control of the other. For example, people see men as logical, so they label women as overly emotional. If humans are intelligent and in charge, animals must be dumb and passive. This way of thinking creates a hierarchy in which people view culture (human life, cities, art, language) as more valuable than nature (forests, animals, rivers). Humans are placed above animals, even though animals are similar to us in many ways. We cannot co-exist without non-human animals, jungles, etc. In my view, it is a basic fact that we must realise and change our opinions and ways against non-humans accordingly.

By breaking away from the Ghosh's binaries of Western thought that he has imposed, he gives equal voice to the forest and the creature that resides in it. In *Jungle Nama*, the tiger-spirit Dokkhin Rai is not a villain in simple moral binary terms but a figure who challenges human exploitation and represents the agency of the forest. This narrative structure aligns with Jesper Hoffmeyer's

(qtd.in Rose 49) idea of the Semiosphere, where all signs and sign systems work together in harmony and existence to create understanding. Humans are not the only beings who matter or think; they participate in a larger story that includes animal sentience, ecological desire, and forest wisdom. The narrative introduces Dokkhin Rai as a haughty and arrogant figure. Who controls the jungle, the writer describes him as, 'Who are these two? He thought, 'Why are they in my forest?' (Ghosh 3), Ghosh here wanted to give equal importance to the animal point of view. Disturbing the very foundation of the jungle means destroying the ecosystem designed for the living creatures, which are themselves part of the wider social circle.

### **Watchful Wilds: *Surveillance and Moral Ecology***

Nature has a way of teaching a lesson to those who relentlessly take from it without reciprocating. Similarly, nature is a slow observer, attentive to the needs of those who respond to its subtle signs and signals, as in the novel, where Dokkhin Rai becomes cautious about the movement of outsiders like Dhona and his gang members entering the jungle in a massive crowd, as if to loot and steal. Dokkhin Rai, portrayed as an astute observer, punishes the evil creature who enters with malicious intent, eventually denouncing them through their furtive footsteps. This idea is reflected in the observation when he says,

"If their intention were not to loot and maraud, they would not think of coming here in such a large horde." (Ghosh 29).

He means that people who come to nature with bad intentions cannot hide it for long. Their actions always give them away. Moreover, through its watchful and living forces, nature always pays attention, silently noting who comes to harm and who is respected. The idea presented in Jungle

Nama resonates with Kohn's concept of "self," in which the forest serves as a watchman and the trees as living or thinking beings.

### **Myth as Environmental Allegory: *From Jungle Nama to Climate Crisis***

Other living organisms in an ecosystem, like ants, microorganisms, tigers, and dogs, constitute the forest. They are part of the entire ecosystem that can make sense of their surroundings and do things their way to complete the life cycle. They have a purpose, a sign, and a feeling, which means that it is not necessary to be a human being to make sense. Still, these creatures can also convey meaning. In the dialogic conversation between Dokkhin Rai and Dhona, the former represents the ascendancy of power, and the latter portrays a greedy merchant. The forest represents the living entity and a communicative one. When Dokkhin Rai says, "These islands are my kingdom" (Ghosh 34), asserting not only domination but also love and protection for the territory and preservation of the terrain. In an article by (Christian, par. 3) which describes how recent natural calamities in various parts of India due to climate change affects not only trouble to the human race but to the animal kingdom as well is well presented and explained by Christian, 2025 says one of the pressing issues is that ecological burden falls mainly on the Antarctic krill and small shrimp-like creatures. Eventually, they form the food web and chain on which penguins, seals, and whales depend on krill. Similarly, in Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*, capricious Dhona tries to extract honey and wax for their selfish needs, without considering the life residing there or contributing in return. Dokkhin Rai, with his watchful gaze at the outsider, tries to protect the trespassers. He is not a monster in a real sense, but Ghosh complicates this figure by protecting non-human life. Moreover, with the rise of climate issues, there is an intense and ongoing conflict between tigers and humans. It is not that tigers are breaking the barrier and entering the human zone. Still, it's the invasion of humans for

breaking the boundary. In the episode, Ghosh portrays Bon-Bibi as a mediator between the two, trying to protect the land and harmonise the fragile ecosystem.

## **Conclusion**

Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* is a story of kinship, in which each member contributes to the jungle's ethics. Each character plays a role and represents a responsibility towards Mother Earth. Ghosh draws attention to the idea that human survival depends on our interconnectedness with other species, ultimately advocating for humility and respect towards animals and forests. The work also honours myths that carry meaning, myths that people have passed down through generations. The paper does not retell any regional legend, but it forces us to think about our relationship with non-humans. *Jungle Nama* is not just a story for entertainment but a moral message to all creatures: look after other beings and believe in reciprocity rather than animosity or hostility. Through this narrative, Ghosh warns us of the dangers ahead in these stories and urges us to take action towards sustainability so that future generations do not face danger because of present actions and deeds. Addressing environmental narratives through storytelling helps readers to recognise the damage and raise awareness of the ongoing problems. Ecological humanities is a genre that is not to be studied critically, but also to be understood through its broader implications. As (Soulé 2) observes, "People save what they love". By portraying this idea in *Jungle Nama*, Ghosh urges readers to cultivate an ecosystem with respect and love. This natural feeling of care and emotional connection pays off more than rationality, and it carries a responsibility to protect our environment. The work *Jungle Nama* tells more than a retelling of the Sunderbans legend; it also foregrounds a complex web in which animals, spirits, hunger, emotions, and everything else are intertwined and co-dependent for survival. The text message foregrounds the subtle cues of

warning, and Eduardo Kohn posits the forest as a living being that thinks and shapes the sign and action through its watchful eyes, which exceed human capability.

Building on Rose's ideas, I treat emotions like love, hate, and anger not only as emotional sentiments but also as necessities in times of crisis. This paper also explains why myth matters more, but it cannot replace policy and science. It generates within us a feeling of care and, in turn, leads us to act, leading us to care for the things that matter to us. The study offers a close reading of Amitav Ghosh's text, which has some limitations and fails to represent how different communities and religions are described, as in local histories, etc. At the same time, it limits close reading; future researchers could focus on lived environmental experience and data collection, as well as on broader readings of Amitav Ghosh's text that capture displacement and climate change. Overall, *Jungle Nama* reiterates the relationship between human and non-human species and that it is not a technical problem but a problem of humanity at large. It teaches us not to control our environment but to treat each living being with care and to be involved in everything as a part of the entire ecosystem that holds value, love, and kinship. When people harm forests, it not only damages the animals that live there but also all the species that live there, and eventually causes the delta's shifting as a whole. Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* at last does not label something as "good" or "bad," but rather expresses an inhabiting world in which justice offers an ecological ground for all living beings.

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