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Linked by Loss: Exploring Trauma through Animal Imagery in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:
Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* may differ in setting, narrative structure, and historical context, but they employ animals and animal imagery to represent experiences of violence, vulnerability, loss, and displacement. In Roy's novel, recurring representations of animals – and in particular, the moth – become intertwined with the trauma experienced by characters whose lives are shaped by social exclusion and familial conflict. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Royal Bengal tiger and the natural environment similarly become connected to histories of displacement, vulnerability, and human suffering.
Drawing on trauma studies and animal studies approaches, this paper explores how animal imagery functions not merely as symbolic decoration but as a means of articulating experiences that resist straightforward human expression. Particular attention is given to the relationships between human and nonhuman vulnerability and to the ways in which memory and loss are inscribed onto the natural world. By examining the two novels separately and then in comparison, this paper argues that the moth and the tiger do the same work in different registers: each gives form to trauma that cannot be spoken directly, and each is bound to a power that decides whose suffering counts. Animal imagery thus creates a shared imaginative space in which personal and collective trauma intersect, suggesting that experiences of loss can cross the boundary between human and nonhuman life.
Keywords: trauma, loss, memory, animal imagery, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh.

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Introduction

Indian literature is rife with animal imagery. From Vedic texts – "the world's oldest, largest and most continuous literature, which... goes back at least 3500 years" (Frawley 11) – to the literary collection of animal fables of the Panchatantra of the third century CE (Cohen and Shehada 5), animals have been portrayed as deities, beasts of burden, or simply friends, among a seemingly endless list of roles. First published in 1891, Kipling's *Beast and Man in India* observes that "all Indian animals are more or less concerned in the Hindu mind with the over or the under world" (353).

Sharma reveals that today, India alone teems with an estimated 102,718 known species of animals, earning it the title of a 'mega-diversity country' – a term coined by former Chief Conservation Officer of Global Wildlife Conservation (now known as Re:wild) Russell Mittermeier – along with sixteen other nations that include Australia, China and Brazil.

With daily life spent in such close quarters, it is little wonder that nonhuman animals have become popular fodder for the storyteller's imagination. From ancient Hindu priests to present-day authors like Aravind Adiga (2008), scribes and writers alike have come to harness the power of animal imagery to create mood, evoke emotions, or weave deeper intentions into their narratives.

Accordingly, this essay will explore trauma through the literal and metaphorical relationship between man and beast in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). It will examine how, in both novels, animal imagery gives form to trauma which the characters cannot articulate directly. Roy's moth lodges a family's inherited, unspoken injury in twins Estha and Rahel, while Ghosh's tiger carries a community's fear and the violence done in response to it. Read together, the two images show that trauma, whether private or collective, is bound up with the power to decide whose suffering counts, and that the animal marks the point where human and nonhuman vulnerability meet.

Critics have read both novels through their treatment of the nonhuman world, but rarely through trauma. On *The God of Small Things*, ecofeminist readings argue that Roy tells human stories through animals (Kunhi and Kunhi), while Aalto shows how Velutha is dehumanised through dog and wolf imagery tied to his caste. On *The Hungry Tide*, scholars have examined topics such as animality and biopolitics (Tsai 150), or the dolphin as a postcolonial figure of extinction (Bhardwaj and O'Key). What is missing is a reading of animal imagery as an expression of trauma across both novels. This essay offers one.

Moths in *The God of Small Things*

From "juicy ants… [that] had to be killed" before they arrived at the "Antly Church" (Roy 185) to party food like disembowelled goats (127), a host of creatures appears in this novel to tie seemingly insignificant details to the more prominent themes – namely, that of death, suffering and human vulnerabilities. A distinctive instance of this is the intermittent appearance of the moth: a symbol of the lingering presence of trauma. Yusin refers to the Greek verb *titrosko*, meaning "to pierce" or "to wound," in discussing the etymology of the term "trauma."

She states that:

> the Greek definition [of trauma] upholds the ambiguity between a physical or psychical injury, making no clear distinction between the two…In German and English, however, the word trauma also includes *traumatism*, which means a particular state or condition of mental shock. (Yusin 240-241)

This section will examine trauma through how it is concerned with the way memory functions, and how unresolved personal and national trauma is manifested.

The Actual Moth

The literal moth was an insect with "unusually dense dorsal tufts" (Roy 49) that Pappachi discovered while he was an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute in Delhi. He believed it to be a new species but was told "that his moth. . .belonged to the tropical family Lymantriidae" (49). Twelve years after that, however, "lepidopterists decided that Pappachi's moth was in fact a. . . genus hitherto unknown to science" (49). By then, Pappachi had retired and returned from Delhi to Ayemenem in the south, and the moth was promptly named after the Acting Director of the Department of Entomology "whom Pappachi had always disliked" (49).

For Pappachi, the overwhelming failure of not having the moth "he had discovered named after him" (48) cast a pall over his golden years. This perceived setback haunted him to the extent that "Pappachi's Moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper"; it "tormented him and his children, and his children's children" (49). Pappachi's jealousy and cruelty extended to Mammachi, who bore the direct brunt of her husband's wrath: he beat her every night with a brass flower vase when her small business became successful. Psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham elaborates that trauma is the idea of "the transgenerational 'phantom' that returns to unsettle the present with respect to crimes or transgressions that have not been worked through" (qtd. in LaCapra 379). Here, the moth is *that* transgenerational phantom – a sign of ongoing "unfinished business" (Tennakoon 10).

The Metaphorical Embodiment of the Moth

Fear of Rejection. Pappachi's Moth made its first appearance at the cinema when his grandchild Rahel inadvertently suggested that her mother Ammu marry the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man – who, unbeknownst to them, had molested her twin Estha shortly before that. Upset at her daughter's sudden outburst – and self-conscious of her own fraught history with marriage – Ammu retorted:

> "D'you know what happens when you hurt people?" Ammu said.
>
> "When you hurt people, they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do. They make people love you a little less."
>
> A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel's heart.
>
> Where its icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. Six goosebumps on her careless heart.
>
> A little less her Ammu loved her. (Roy 112)

Ammu might have thought she was simply disciplining Rahel for speaking thoughtlessly, but to a seven-year-old, losing a parent's love is "a highly traumatic experience for a child" (Marici et al. 2); the encounter was so traumatic that Rahel felt exactly "six goosebumps on her careless heart" (112), where the metaphorical moth planted its legs.

Outka's postcolonial reading states that:

> One of the most noted after-effects of traumatic experience is. . . when past events threaten to take over the present, returning repeatedly to haunt the current moment in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations, or dreams. . .traumatic events may, strangely, be both erased from memory and yet return repeatedly as flashback. (4)

Consequently, the memory of having lost some parental love returns to haunt Rahel several days after, on the morning before heading to Cochin Airport to welcome her English cousin Sophie Mol to India. When Rahel thanks her mother for the new frock and knickers, Ammu replies:

> "You're welcome, my sweetheart."
>
> The moth on Rahel's heart lifted a downy leg. Then put it back.
>
> Its little leg was cold.
>
> A little less her mother loved her. (Roy 136)

Because of the twins' insecure attachment to their mother – who had also once accused them of being “the millstones round my neck” (291) – they would grow up to exhibit “feelings of non-acceptance and experience difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships” (Marici et al. 3). In fact, Outka observes the twins and their mother Ammu to be “the novel’s most traumatised characters” (5), and Estha as “the twin most traumatised by the events [who finds refuge in] amnesia” (7).

Howe explains that when children bear feelings of being unloved, they develop “a degree of hypervigilance… [where they] cannot find or display their true and full psychological self to an anxious carer” (745). This relational disconnect plays out in Rahel's later life: her mother Ammu's unpredictability in doling out love to her children was one of many traumatic childhood events that eventually caused Rahel to drift from school to school and job to job, fail at marriage like her mother before her, and form complicated relationships with the Ayemenem community upon her return as an adult.

However, to read Rahel’s wound only as a private failure of attachment is to leave the moth’s origins unexamined. Postcolonial critics argue that dominant trauma theory, with its focus on a single catastrophic event and the individual psyche, overlooks trauma that is cumulative and structural (Craps 3). Ammu’s “careless words” do not arise in isolation. She is a divorced woman living on sufferance in her parents’ house, in a family whose cruelty and hierarchies are bound up with caste and an Anglophile respect for colonial authority. The moth itself carries this history: it belongs to Pappachi, whose rage grows from a humiliation within the imperial scientific order that denied him recognition. Rahel’s moth is therefore not an isolated event, but part of a chain of injuries passed down through the family, which fits the “temporal hybridity” Outka identifies in which past wounds return to unsettle the present. Read this way, the moth is a figure for trauma that is at once intimate and historical, and its returns mark how a private moment of rejection is

shaped by larger structures that decide whose love and whose lives matter.

Echoes of Death. The tragic drowning of the twins' cousin Sophie Mol – “hatted, bell-bottomed and Loved from the Beginning” (Roy 328) – finds the novel at its climax. In this chapter, the children attempted to cross the Meenachal River in a boat. The twins were trying to run away to the History House, driven by a sense of rejection from Ammu. As they navigated the river, which was more violent than the children had anticipated, their boat hit a log and capsized. Estha and Rahel managed to swim to shore, but Sophie Mol disappeared. Rahel's realisation that Sophie Mol had perhaps drowned is marked by a symbolic moment where “on Rahel's heart Pappachi's moth snapped open its sombre wings. Out. In. And lifted its legs. Up. Down” (293).

The phrase “on Rahel's heart” establishes a direct association between the insect and the child’s inner emotional world: Roy externalises Rahel’s distress through the image of an animal whose movements become inseparable from her bodily experience. Additionally, the verb “snapped” is of much significance as it conveys a sudden, forceful movement which suggests the involuntary activation of fear into the child’s consciousness. The adjective “sombre” further establishes an atmosphere of darkness and foreboding – a prelude to the emotional consequences of Sophie Mol’s disappearance. Finally, the moth’s movement also creates an unsettling sense of repetition. “Out. In.” and “Up. Down.” reproduce the rhythm of the insect’s movements through fragmented syntax. The narrative style, which often adopts the viewpoint of the children, highlights how they perceived and processed death. “It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined” (16) suggests that the impact of Sophie’s death became a defining element in the twins’ lives, overshadowing their memories of her as a person.

The drowning is the novel's central event, yet the trauma it produces cannot be reduced to that one episode. The phrase "Loved from the Beginning" (Roy 328) places Sophie Mol at the top of a hierarchy of love in the Ayemenem household: Anglophile in its ways and anxious about caste and propriety. The twins, like Velutha, stand in the lower rungs of love. When Sophie Mol dies, this hierarchy turns on all involved. Baby Kochamma's false accusation of Velutha forces the twins to choose between speaking and protecting their mother, and their betrayal of him – not the drowning alone – is the wound that does not close.

Postcolonial critics have argued that trauma theory built around a single catastrophic event misses harm of this cumulative, structural kind – "that traumatic experiences of people of color, women. . .lower-class people. . .often fly under the trauma-theoretical radar because of the fact that current definitions of trauma have been constructed from the experiences of dominant groups in Western society" (Craps 3). The moth, which first landed on Rahel's heart when she was told she was loved "a little less" (Roy 112), belongs to the same history, so it returns at the moment the family's order claims its victim.

The aftermath shows how this trauma silences: Estha's muteness and Rahel's inability to piece a proper life together are not only individual symptoms but the consequences of a situation in which the children's testimony is neither wanted nor believed. In postcolonial terms, their trauma is not simply unspoken but unwitnessed (Craps 4). The line about the memory of death outliving the life it "purloined" (Roy 16) then reads as an indictment: what survives is the violence, while the child who was loved is remembered less than the way she died.

The Guilt of a Betrayal. At the police station, the sight of their grand-aunt Baby Kochamma made the twins "suddenly sober" (Roy 315) because they were confronted with the manipulative power she wielded over them when at the same time, they had to grapple with the gravity of their cousin's

death. By then, “Pappachi's moth was on the move” inside the inspector's room (316).

The police station – representative of institutional authority – intensifies the twins’ fear as the moth’s presence within the inspector’s room links their psychological suffering with an adult-controlled environment. In describing the shifting moth, the phrase “on the move” suggests activity and progression, as though the psychological disturbance represented by the creature is intensifying. Its movement parallels the escalation of the situation: by scheming to blame Velutha for the children’s disappearance and the death of Sophie Mol, Baby Kochamma had manipulated the circumstances to her advantage – and the twins were forced to confront a choice whose consequences they could not fully comprehend. The moth can thus be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of the coercive structures surrounding the children.

When Baby Kochamma revealed her plot to falsely accuse Velutha, a Paravan man who worked at Mammachi’s pickle factory, “the moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts spread its wings over both their hearts” (315). The emotional consequences of the unfolding tragedy are no longer Rahel’s alone, now that the moth had appeared on “both their hearts”; they are shared by Estha as well.

The technical specificity of the description “unusually dense dorsal tufts” makes the moth appear potentially haunting. Its unusual appearance reinforces its association with an abnormal psychological condition: the children are experiencing circumstances that disrupt the ordinary security of childhood. The moth represents the psychological burden imposed on them by a situation in which their choices are severely constrained. Consequently, by choosing to save Ammu, they betrayed Velutha – whose brutal beating by a group of policemen in front of the twins themselves, eventually resulted in his death. The betrayal of Velutha, whom the twins loved dearly, compromised their moral integrity and marked a critical turning point in their lives.

Tigers in *The Hungry Tide*

In the novel, Ghosh explores the complex lives of Kanai Dutt, Piya Roy, and Fokir – an educated translator from New Delhi, an American-born biologist of Bengali/Indian heritage and a poor local fisherman, respectively – in the Sundarbans, a treacherous landscape where people battle daily against the forces of nature to survive. One of the most influential symbols used in the novel is the Royal Bengal tiger, which represents the untamed nature of wilderness in the Sundarbans and, most importantly, acts as a metaphor for the traumatic experiences of the characters in the book. Through animal imagery – and specifically, tiger imagery – the author explores the themes of fear, loss, survival, and the human-versus-nature conflict, reflecting the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the characters.

The Tigers of the Sundarbans

Trauma and Fear. Ghosh makes the Royal Bengal tiger of the Sundarbans both a presence in the inhabitants' lives and a figure for the trauma that shapes those lives. The tiger is portrayed as a creature of terror, representing the constant threat the natural world poses to the island's inhabitants. For the locals, the tiger was a reminder that they were facing constant danger and that, at any moment, they could lose their lives. Kanai's aunt Nilima captured this terror well when she explained the dangers posed by tigers: "I've come to believe what people say in these parts: that if you see a tiger, the chances are you won't live to tell the tale" (Ghosh 261).

On one hand, the inhabitants of the islands lived in constant fear of the tiger, and this fear of the tiger created a psychological burden and trauma that the inhabitants shared. On the other hand, the local population respected the tigers, viewing them as embodiments of the forest's grand but untamed power. This duality reflects humans' complex relationship with nature: fearful of its dangers, but respectful of its majesty and essential role in the ecosystem.

The tiger symbolises the extraordinary power nature holds over the people in the tide country – and the inhabitants clearly understood that. However, the tiger lingers as an unseen presence throughout most of the novel – but people knew that when it appeared, the beast could kill without warning. Even uttering the word "tiger" was taboo. As seen in Garjontola, when Piya was about to say 'tiger', Fokir raised a finger to prevent her. "She understood now that this was indeed some kind of superstition – to say that word or even to make a gestural reference to it was taboo" (153). The fact that uttering the word 'tiger' or even making a gestural reference to the animal was taboo demonstrates the animal's invisible grip over the people's psyche. Accordingly, Carlson and Dalenberg explain that "traumas that are more intense are more likely to provoke overwhelming fear and helplessness because of their more negative valence" (18).

To read the tiger only as a figure for human fear, however, is to overlook that it is also an animal – an animal with a world of its own, drawn into the same violence as the people who fear it. Scholars of animality and biopolitics have noted how the novel places human and nonhuman lives under shared structures of power (Tsai), and how tiger conservation becomes a pretext for violence against people, who in turn retaliate against tigers. In this light, the taboo against naming the tiger is not simply superstition but a way of living alongside an animal whose presence shapes the whole community's life. The tiger's terror, then, belongs to a relationship in which humans and animals both suffer.

When the inhabitants kill a tiger that has previously killed two people, the act is not only a response to nature's threat. It shows how fear, grief and anger turn into violence against an animal that is itself a victim of the same pressures – a point Kanai's later criticism of conservation makes explicit. The tiger is at once the source of the community's trauma and a casualty of it, which makes the trauma shared rather than something done to humans by nature.

Human versus Nature, East versus West. Ghosh, a strong critic of Western environmental narratives which he feels are colonial and detached from local histories and communities, is backed by historian Ross Mallick who points out that a special *National Geographic Explorer* "did not allow the villagers [of the Sundarbans] to speak for themselves on the issue [of the environment]" (qtd. in White 515). Mallick further observes that:

> when the inhabitants of the island are represented, they are featured as a threat to the environment: "WWF literature started to blame the poor for being the 'most direct threat to wildlife and wildlands'". (qtd. in White 515)

How Western environmental narratives prioritise the saving of the tigers over the lives of the local people is seen when the island inhabitants were forced to make brutal choices. In the novel, the characters confronting the darkest aspects of their nature indicate that trauma can lead to a loss of compassion and humanity. This is evident when Fokir, along with the crowd, killed a tiger by setting it on fire.

Through Kanai, Fokir later told Piya that "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (Ghosh 295). It is essential to state that the same tiger had previously killed two people in the village. The killing of this tiger was not only for survival, but it manifested the collective trauma nature had inflicted on the inhabitants of the Sundarbans.

After they witnessed the destruction of the Bengal tiger that had killed several villagers, Kanai articulated the complex implications of the impetus for environmental and species protection:

> Piya dissociated herself with a shake of the head. "I don't see how I'm complicit." "Because it was people like you," said Kanai, "who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I'm complicit because people like me – Indians of my class, that is – have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry

> favour with their Western patrons. It's not hard to ignore the people who're dying – after all, they are the poorest of the poor. But just ask yourself whether this would be allowed to happen anywhere else. There are more tigers living in America in captivity than there are in all of India – what do you think would happen if they started killing human beings?" (301)

Piya, an Indian-American raised and educated in the United States, symbolises Western scientific knowledge; Fokir, an impoverished Bengali fisherman, represents a different form of knowledge – a sophisticated embodied knowledge of the environment in which he inhabits. Kanai recognised that Indian elites were also responsible for currying favour with the West, and he strongly criticised the way environmental conservation could become entangled with class, colonial power and Western influence.

Through the use of tiger imagery in his novel, Ghosh seeks answers to who has the right to define environmental problems, and in whose interest conservation serves. The human-versus-nature struggle and the Western-Indian tension expose different natures of trauma, especially as a collective experience and as individual struggle.

Through the characters' interactions and their experiences in the Sundarbans, the reader links the tiger to the trauma that nature inflicts on the inhabitants of the islands. The human-nature and postcolonial conflicts are central to Ghosh's novel, and the tiger is used to symbolise the instability of the natural world, environmental conservation, social injustice – and human resilience.

In both *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, trauma emerges as a central theme, shaping the lives and identities of the characters. In the former, trauma is deeply personal, rooted in familial and societal injustices that continually haunt generations thereafter. The recurring image of the moth symbolises the pervasive presence of

trauma in the lives of the characters, particularly in that of the twins, and is often associated with moments of intense emotional pain. In contrast, *The Hungry Tide* explores trauma as a collective experience, tethered to the historical and environmental forces that impact the marginalised communities of the Sundarbans. The tiger's lingering presence highlights the trauma inflicted not only by nature but also by historical injustices, colonial exploitation, and displacement.

Conclusion

The moth and the tiger – in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), respectively – each give a body to what the characters cannot say, and each is linked to an authority that treats certain lives as disposable, whether the family, the police or the conservation politics that weigh tigers above villagers. Ghosh goes further than Roy in allowing the animal to suffer alongside the humans, but in both novels the animal marks the crossroads where human and nonhuman frailties stand.

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