

# Tale of Jungle Nama: Drawing the Lines between Needs and Wants

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**Abstract:** Human needs are insatiable. There are no limits to man's irrational desires. He has tried to grab everything that has come on his way. This has put the earth and our natural habitat in great danger. The great Indian English writer, Amitabh Ghosh, through his non-fictional works tries to create awareness about the threats to our environment. He sincerely dedicates himself to tell humanity about the most significant need to maintain a balance between needs and wants. Ghosh wrote his new book, "*Jungle Nama*" in metered verse to emphasize the need of boundaries in their most basic form. The ancient legend of Bon Bibi has been used as an allegory by Ghosh for the climate crisis. While we need to take certain things from the mother earth for our livelihood and sustenance, we should not cross our limits and destroy the land. Most traditional legends from Sundarbans, including the story of Bon Bibi, suggest that men should maintain balance and curb their greed in order to cohabit peacefully with the natural world.

**Keywords:** Limits, Boundaries, Greed, Climate Crisis

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many of his works, Amitav Ghosh sets his story in the Sundarbans, which are the largest mangrove forests of the world. His award-winning 2005 novel, "*The Hungry Tide*", set in these mangrove jungles, describes vividly its culture and ecology through sumptuous prose. His novel, "*The Gun Island*" is also set in the wetlands of the East. "The Sundarbans is a very powerful landscape. It just works its ways into your head, so that you cannot escape it even when you want to," Ghosh says. "When I started writing '*Gun Island*', initially I did not intend to start it in the Sundarbans. But somehow it just happened. The Sundarbans itself pulled me back into the landscape, so that I had to engage with it. Clearly, it just keeps pulling you back," he further elaborates. In "*Jungle Nama*" Ghosh adapts verse to narrate an episode from the legend of Bon Bibi, which also forms the basis of the book "*The Hungry Tide*". The Legend of Bon Bibi was first published in the 19th century by two poets, namely Munshi Mohammad and Abdul Rahim Sahib, separately, in 'Bon Bibi Johurnama' (The narrative of Bon Bibi's Glory). They appeared in the Bengali verse meter called "dwipodipoyar". Ghosh has written a *Jungle Nama* in poyar-like style where the culture and ecology of Sundarbans have been captured vividly. Collaborating with New York-based artist, Salman Toor, the writer has been able to create a book that we can both 'see' and 'read'.

Words, says Ghosh, are partly responsible for the crisis facing us and our planet. Our desire to express everything in words leaves us with no alternative but to be preoccupied with a life and culture that is predominantly human. We need to recognise the existence of non-human agency. "*The Great Derangement*" written by Amitabh Ghosh, suggests that writers should invent new forms to address climate change. The non-human voice is the one that has been completely suppressed by modern literature though it always found a very significant place in

every culture of the past. Previously, Ghosh wrote fiction to make the people aware of the climate crisis. But he is now increasingly writing non-fiction to address the grave crisis of our times, that is, climate catastrophe.

In "*Jungle Nama*", Ghosh's first ever work in verse, he has "tried to use the moral compass that lies within folktale to arouse environmental consciousness among the people of the area"<sup>1</sup>. Since it is difficult to write stories about the climate, Ghosh believes folklore can fulfill that purpose: "In these stories, we find an interconnectivity between people and the land that sustains them". It is in the lives of farmers, fishermen, herdsmen and those who live attached to the land, that we can renew our Earth. Ghosh says that the locals of Sundarbans believe in a culture that requires a balance to be maintained between the needs of the natural world and those of humans. Their practice and belief system emphasizes the importance of limiting greed which Ghosh states is an important lesson for the rest of the land in the times of climate change. Bon Bibi, the forest goddess, is the protector of all, irrespective of religion, caste and community. The local people who depend on the forest for their livelihood respect her and pray to her in times of need, and she is benevolent to everyone.

Ghosh begins his storytelling by saying that the deep mangrove forest was once the realm of a demon king, Dokkhin Rai who haunted the wilderness and preyed on innocent villagers in the guise of a tiger. Hearing the prayers of the terrified people, Bon Bibi and her warrior brother, Shah Jongoli came from far off Arabia to rescue them from the terror of Dokkhin Rai. They defeat their rival and set strict limits to his forest constituency. Following this legend, all the locals of Sundarbans - woodcutters, honey collectors and fishermen - evoke her blessings to safeguard themselves before entering the forests. "*Jungle Nama*" also tells the tale of the greedy merchant, Dhona, the poor boy, Dukhey and his mother. Not satisfied with his own wealth, Dhona decides to explore the mangrove jungles, looking for legendary treasure. Accompanied by a fleet of seven ships, arranged by his brother, Mona, who refuses to go with him, Dhona sets for the southern jungle which is the realm of Dokkhin Rai. The story tells the tale of poor Dukhey who is coaxed to go with his rich uncle in his pursuit of wax, honey and wood.

Dokkhin Rai, the jungle lord, spins "a web of illusions", "conjuring up visions laden with temptations" (p32) and Dhona is lured to strike a deal with the evil spirit: in exchange for the riches of the forest, he must sacrifice Dukhey to the tiger. On the farmudbank, when Dukhey catches sight of the beast, all seems lost for him. Then finally, he remembers his mother's words: "Use the meter of wonder, call Bon Bibi" (pg53), and carries it out truly. Sure enough, Bon Bibi arrives with her brother, Shah Jongoli to rescue Dukhey and subdue Dokkhin Rai. The story ends with poetic justice; all ends well. Dukhey is rewarded with lots of wealth and he is reunited with his mother. He lives happily ever after as he is contented with what he has. His teacher, Bon Bibi had "taught him the secret of

how to be happy. All you need to do, is to be content with what you have got; to be always craving more, is a demon's lot" (p70)

## II. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Dhona's desire to plunder the forest symbolises man's greed to get more and more. It is this demand to get more that results in unending exploitation of the earth. Amitabh Ghosh says, "Capitalism only survives in circumstances of discontent. It makes people want more, more and more. And now, you know, we are the endpoint of that wanting more. It has brought us to this planetary catastrophe that is going to end human civilization as we know it."<sup>2</sup> 'Jungle Nama' is an allegory and you only need to look at the couplets in isolation to unearth bigger meanings: "You must stay within your bounds and never transgress; with what you have you must make do, don't seek excess." (Pg56) The theme has a universal appeal. It emphasizes the necessity for limits, for humans to recognise boundaries. In the end of the story, when Bon Bibi rescues Dukhey, she reinstates both moral and ecological balance. It was the blessed meter that came to Dukhey's rescue when he needed the help of Bon Bibi. Ghosh says, "the story of Jungle Nama is about the necessity for limits, for humans to recognise boundaries. And meter does exactly the same things with words. It forces you to recognise the basic forms of expression and the need for boundaries."<sup>3</sup>

In his works, Amitabh Ghosh has always been concerned with the environment. "Man is transgressing where he should not. He is wreaking havoc on the land, water and air"<sup>4</sup>. The ecological disbalance that man faces today is humanity's own making. A shrinking Arctic, uprooted people and animals, abrupt cold spells followed by intense heat waves—these are all effects of climate change that, sadly, are now happening more frequently. The world of plants seems quite stationary to humans, with little movement that meets the eye. But in reality, it is a separate universe of its own, characterised by behavioural and emotional patterns that were previously unknown. Deforestation has led to climate change, flooding, increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and a host of

problems for our planet. Extreme warming has contributed to a spate of wildfires in different parts of the globe and thousand hectares of land have been destroyed by these wild fires. Greenland recorded rain for the first time. Quite a few islands of the Sundarbans are sinking fast due to the rising sea level and extreme weather disasters like cyclones and storms. The eroding ecosystem of this mangrove forest has always been the concern of Amitabh Ghosh.

## CONCLUSION

In quest of progress and development, we should not lose our empathy and respect for our environment. If we waste and destroy the resources of nature, and unsustainably exhaust the land, then the consequences will be disastrous. It is still not too late; we can come together and collectively choose a more sustainable future where nature and people thrive together. There should be a balance between human urge towards prosperity and the needs of other creatures. Man cannot prosper by snatching everything from Nature. To conclude, the earth should be a place where humans observe "certain limits in relation to the earth, and in relation to the world, to the environment."<sup>5</sup>

## References

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