

Chapter 11

An Ecofeminist Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*

Sayantani Sengupta
St Xavier's University, India

ABSTRACT

*The relationship between women and nature is powerful. Through various legends and folktales, women have been projected as the goddesses who would save the forests as well as save the world from overconsumption and greed. The focus of this chapter is one of the popular legends of India, the legend of Bonbibi in Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama*. Bonbibi is widely worshipped by the people of the Sundarbans, which has been mentioned by Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. But the primary focus of *Jungle Nama* is on the three central characters, Dukhey, Dhona, and Dokkhin Rai, and how Bonbibi comes as a saviour of the young boy, Dukhey, and thus becomes the preserver of the natural order. On the other hand, Manasa, the snake goddess can also be portrayed as someone who maintains a balance between life and death, avarice and generosity, as well as good and evil. The chapter intends to critically study Ghosh's retelling of the Bonbibi legend through an ecofeminist lens and also includes the story of Manasa to substantiate the interconnections between women and nature.*

INTRODUCTION

Though the term “ecofeminism” is contemporary, the primary motive behind it has always encouraged women to save their surroundings, the nature and the livelihood, as mentioned by Ariel Salleh in the foreword of *Ecofeminism* (ix). (Mies and Shiva, 2014) One of the earliest successful environmental movements in India is the Bishnoi

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movement of the 1700s. Amrita Devi and the Bishnoi villagers hugged the trees to stop the massacre which was led by the soldiers of the king. Due to this movement, the king ordered to protect the land and the animals from further attacks. A similar movement can be found in the Tehri-Garhwal region in 1973 which is popularly known as the Chipko movement. The role of women in this movement was remarkable and this became a turning point in the history of environmental movements, both locally and globally. Many such movement followed after this and they were dedicated to safeguard the natural resources, which is the primary essence of ecocriticism. Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive* (Shiva, 1988), established the fact that women and nature are intertwined, “nature is symbolized as the embodiment of feminine principle” and she is also protected and nurtured by a woman for sustenance and life (p. 37). Shiva further emphasized on the importance of the dynamic energy called Shakti because everything arises from this energy itself and the “manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti). “Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world.” (p. 37). Thus, the presence and interconnectedness of men and women forms the focal point of the Indian ecology because the two are inseparable and important to maintain a balance in the world.

Since the humans started to exploit nature in the name of development, their greed intensified, and the economic growth became the most important aspect. Soon, instead of being a part of nature, humans became the center of it and disregarded the nonhumans. It affected the bond between human beings as well, the survival of the fittest became the ultimate truth because individuals could go to any extent to acquire wealth and fame in the society. Through several folktales and legends, humans have given the responsibility to a woman to save nature from repeated exploitation. One of them is the famous legend of Bon Bibi, which is popular among the people of Sundarban. Since it is meant to read aloud and performed, they regularly enact the legend as a stage-play in the villages as said by Amitav Ghosh (2021) in his afterword of *Jungle Nama* (p. 74). In an article, “Tales From the Forest”, Ghosh mentioned, “the basic message of the Bon Bibi legend is that it is essential to place limits on human greed in order to preserve a balance between the needs of humans and those of other beings. This message does not belong to any one religion: it recurs frequently in the stories of Adivasis and forest peoples around the world” (Ghosh, 2021). This article also highlights a major practice, the practice of acceptance without any discrimination on the basis of caste or religion. People of the Sundarban region read, follow and respect the legend of Bon Bibi irrespective of their religion and caste, hence Ghosh said, “The story provides a kind of ethical charter—almost a law—for how people should relate to the forest, and it has an enormous influence on the lives of the inhabitants.”

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