

FEAR AND ETHICS IN THE SUNDARBANS
ANTHROPOLOGY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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Abstract.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has been often interpreted from the point of view of postcolonial studies and environmental studies, overlooking the anthropological implications of the narrative. This paper investigates the worship and the myth of the sylvan deity Bonbibi, and of her counterpart, the demon Dakshin Rai. The goddess, endowed with an apotropaic function, protects the people who “do the forest” from the dangers of the wilderness, epitomized by (but not limited to) tigers. According to anthropologist Annu Jalais, who accompanied Ghosh in the Sundarbans when he was collecting material for the novel, Bonbibi is associated with a kind of forest ethics, which is owned by Fokir, the fisherman. This ethics, which in the novel remains in the background due to the urban viewpoint of the protagonists, very coherently explains otherwise eccentric behaviours and elusive answers of subaltern characters such as Fokir, Moyna and Horen.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Literature and Anthropology, *The Hungry Tide*, Bonbibi.

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Due to the recent so-called «ethical turn»¹, a vast number of literary critics have explored and highlighted the ethical concerns that underlie Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Indeed, the novel, published in the aftermath of 9/11, tackles both environmental issues and the ethics of the globalization, becoming one of the first classics of ecocriticism. In a remote area such as the Sundarbans, where the novel is set, ecological issues cannot be disentangled from postcolonial issues, which lie, broadly speaking, at the bottom of modern globalization and its new subalternities². Amitav Ghosh himself declared in an interview in 2007 that *The Hungry Tide* stemmed from two concerns, namely the protection of environment and the admiration of beauty. These are the author's words:

After 9/11 Rilke was an enormous inspiration for me – that's what Rilke is about, about loving the world, about seeing it and loving for what it is. So for me, *The Hungry Tide* came out of these two imperatives: one was just to find a way of saying what is so mysterious and magnificent and wonderful about this world, in all its horror. What is it that makes life worth living? This is what I would want to tell my own children: that there's much that is wrong with the world, and yet you have only this one life, as Rilke so beautifully says, and you must live it completely, and inhabit this world and see it in all its beauty. That was one aspect of it, the other was that I do think that writers of my generation have a duty to address issues of the environment. When we look at writers of the Thirties and Forties, we ask «where did you stand on fascism?» In the future

¹ Todd F Davis and Kenneth Womack, *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (University of Virginia Press, 2001).

² There are a lot of studies on these issues, among the most often quoted see Pablo Mukherjee, "Surfing the Second Wave: Amitav Ghosh's *the Hungry Tide*," in *Literature and Globalization: A Reader*, ed. Liam Connell and Marsh Nicky, *Mla-Ib* (London, England: Routledge, 2011). And Divya Anand, "Words on Water. Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008).

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they will look at us and say «where did you stand on the environment?» I think this is absolutely the fundamental question of our time.³

The overwhelming urgency of these topics has attracted most criticism on *The Hungry Tide*, which has often overlooked the anthropological side of the novel. *The Hungry Tide* is not only a novel on environment and a novel about the Morichjāpi massacre and Bangladeshi refugees, but also a research novel⁴, based on both archival search and field work. In his acknowledgements at the end of the book, Ghosh profusely thanks the young anthropologist Annu Jalais, to whom he dedicates a whole paragraph:

I had the privilege of being able to travel in the tide country with Annu Jalais, one of those rare scholars who combines immense personal courage with extraordinary linguistic and intellectual gifts: her research into the history and culture of the region will, I am certain, soon come to be regarded as definitive. For the example of her integrity, as for her unstinting generosity in sharing her knowledge, I owe Annu Jalais an immense debt of gratitude⁵.

Later Annu Jalais would publish the results of her research in a compelling book called *Forest of Tigers*⁶. In this paper, I shall resort to Jalais's and other anthropologists' observations to highlight the link between two episodes in the novel where fear plays a major role. I am

³ Alessandro Vescovi, "Amitav Ghosh in Conversation," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 40, no. 4 (2009): 136-37.

⁴ I used this definition with regard to the Ibis Trilogy, but it applies to *The Hungry Tide* as well; see my "Voicing Unspoken Histories: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as Research Novel," in *History and Narration: Looking Back from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Marialuisa Bignami, Francesca Orestano, and Alessandro Vescovi (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Press, 2011: 190-209).

⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 331-332.

⁶ Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010).

referring to the quarrel between Kanai, the metropolitan outsider in the Sundarbans, and Fokir, the local fisherman in the chapter entitled “Signs”; and to the story of Dukhey as translated by Kanai for Piya in the chapter called “A Gift”. Since there are parallels between the story of Bonbibi, the goddess of the Sundarbans, and the novel, we shall examine both narratives at once.

In the Sundarbans *varnas* distinctions are not particularly relevant; the main social distinction occurs between Bhadrалoks and Gramerлoks, that is gentry, who usually own some land and live on agriculture, and those who owe nothing and «do the forest» for a living. Although there is a certain mobility between the two groups – as the character of Moyna, Fokir’s wife, attests – they tend to live apart from each other. Fokir transfers the mistrust for the Bhadrалoks on Kanai. The long-accumulated tension between them explodes when two are left alone on the Fokir’s rowboat near the island of Garjontola. Both men are in love with the same woman, *viz.* Piya, an American young cetologist of Indian origin. Within the village society and even on the main boat, with the elderly boatman Horen and Piya herself, the hierarchy between them prevents conflicts, but as they find themselves alone on water, things start to reverse. Fokir points to some marks on the shore that, he maintains, were left by a tiger; Kanai is unsure and does not trust the fisherman:

«The animal must have spotted us and come down to take a closer look.»
The thought of this, a tiger coming down to the water’s edge in order to watch their progress across the mohona, was just far-fetched enough to make Kanai smile⁷.

⁷ *The Hungry Tide*, 264.



Fig. 1. Padmarks and crabs holes in the mud of the Sundarbans

Kanai replies that those depressions on the wet sand are just crabs' burrows [fig. 1], challenging him further: «What makes you think they have anything to do with the big cat?» By way of reply, Fokir leans over and, taking hold of Kanai's hand, places it on the back of his neck. Kanai snatches his arm back «but not before he had felt the goosebumps bristling on the moist surface of Fokir's skin». «That's how I know,» Fokir replies. «It's the fear that tells me.» And adds: «And what about you?» «Can you feel the fear?» In another context, a man challenging a rival would put forward his courage, not his fear, so Kanai is puzzled, not understanding what the other aims at. He considers the question carefully: surely, Fokir cannot have feigned his fear. However, Kanai realizes that, in fact, he himself is not afraid, not because he is particularly courageous, but because his background is different from

Fokir's. His train of thoughts in this circumstance owes much to the author's anthropological training:

But he knew also that fear was not – contrary to what was often said – an instinct. It was something learned, something that accumulated in the mind through knowledge, experience and upbringing. Nothing was harder to share than another person's fear, and at that moment he certainly did not share Fokir's⁸.

What follows can be read on three different levels: at a political and social level, the power relations between the two men are reversed and Kanai is obliged to recognize to what extent his own social class and his privileges depend on subalterns like Fokir. At the plot level, the difference between the two men comes to a climax when Kanai abuses Fokir, who leaves him behind alone on the island, thus re-enacting Dukhey's story, as we shall see. On an anthropological level, Fokir says things about fear that are not immediately comprehensible to the townsman. The fisherman urges Kanai, since he claims not to be afraid, to land on the island, asking him whether he is «clean» i.e., he explains, «good at heart». Kanai is taken aback and replies that he *thinks* he is good enough. On the island, Fokir maintains, he will know it for sure, because «in Garjontola, Bonbibbi would show you whatever you wanted to know.» Adding «Why would you be frightened? Didn't I tell you what my mother said? No one who is good at heart has anything to fear in this place». Kanai takes a while to realize it, but eventually he fully comprehends the situation: «Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged» the now scared, but still lucid Delhi man ponders. Thus, it becomes clear that the kind of challenge that the fisherman issues to his rival is by no means

⁸ *The Hungry Tide*, 266.

what the other expected. It is neither a subtle game on fear, nor a proof of courage, but a proof of ethical virtues, where Bonbibí, the sylvan deity, is to be judge.

Fokir's behaviour is not as eccentric as it may seem to a metropolitan reader, much less is it the invention of the novelist, but rather the manifestation of a complex ethos rooted in the Tide Country, where it is hypostatized through Bonbibí. It will be therefore necessary to recall her story, since myth and worship are strictly connected. Bonbibí is venerated both by Muslims and Hindus and is always represented in an attitude of mild conquest [see fig.2], resembling similar representations of Durga.



Fig. 2. Typical clay figure of Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jangali sitting on the discomfited Tiger Demon with Dukhey at their feet

Scholars are divided on her origins: some believe that she is Muslim, as the legend says that she comes from Arabic countries, while others maintain that she is of Hindu origin, as she is virtually unknown outside

the Sunderbans, and that Muslims have taken up her cult by imitation⁹. Indeed, Hindus and Muslims worship her in different ways: for the Hindus she is a *devi* and for the Muslim a *pirani*, *sufi* saint. However, Bonbibi does not enjoy the same standing of other *sufi* saints venerated in Bangladesh. This may be due to the fact that there are no historical proves of her existence or it may be linked to the fact that her devoted are from lowly classes, or it may be connected to her gender (other *pirs* are males). Unlike major divinities, Bonbibi is not invoked to ask for salvation, but only to help during forest expeditions, and is not served by actual priests. Nevertheless, her cult implies a rather sophisticated liturgy and a complex ethics.

The popularity of Bonbibi rests on one *Jabarnama* (Tale of the sublime manifestation of Grace), which is made of two different parts: the first recounts the birth of Bonbibi and her travel to India, the second tells the story of Dukhey, a Bengali young man. Bonbibi's father, who lived in Mecca, had one sorrow: he and his wife could have no children. Therefore he made a trip to Medina to ask the prophet what to do to get babies. The prophet asked Fatima, who read the Quran and eventually stated that he should marry a second wife. Accordingly the man went back home and told his wife he would marry another woman. The lady was not pleased, however, she said, she would accept it provided she was granted a boon. She did not reveal what the boon would be yet, but eventually, when the new wife was pregnant, she grew jealous and asked that she be banned. The wretched woman went to live in the forest and soon gave birth to two children whom she called Bonbibi and Shah Jangali; unable to raise them both, the woman abandoned the girl.

⁹ Sufia Uddin, "Beyond National Borders and Religious Boundaries," in *Engaging South Asian Religions*, ed. Matthew N. Schmalz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011). See also Tushar K. Niyogi, *Aspects of Folk Cults in South Bengal* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, Ministry of Human Resources Development). And Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010).

Fortunately, she was raised by a deer, and grew up. Later the family was shortly re-united before Bonbibi and her brother went to Medina where they consulted Fatima about their future. The holy woman, hearing Bonbibi's story, granted her the possibility of saving forest people whenever they would seek her assistance.

Thus Bonbibi and Shah Jangali went to India (like many historical *sufi* did) where they were to become lords of the swamp land. This was then inhabited by a demon, Dakshin Ray, and his mother, Narayani, who attacked the twins. Bonbibi was about to be overcome, when she called Fatima who came to her rescue and defeated Dakshin Ray and Narayani. However, as it often happens in Indian myths, Bonbibi showed her generosity and decided that she would rule only on half the land, leaving the rest to the demon. After this, Bonbibi started moving from village to village to establish her rule.

This part of the story is clearly Muslim and it is perfectly orthodox. The twins saints, like other *sufi* saints in Chittagong and elsewhere in Bengal, move to India taking their wisdom with them and take their abode in the forest; Dakshin Ray is a local demon and Bonbibi does not destroy him and her mother, she simply brings civilization and submits the demon, but grants him his life.



Fig. 3. The final scene of the theatrical performance enacts the typical representation of Bonbibi

There is a sort of sequel to the story, which repeats the story of Bonbibi and her brother with different characters. The second story is wholly set in the Sundarbans and forms the subject for the *yatra* – a kind of rustic theatrical performance [see picture 3] – attended by Kanai as a child, when he first visited the Sundarbans, and which is partly translated by Kanai in his parting letter to Piya. The protagonist is a grown-up boy called Dukhey who is very poor and is only able to look after cows, which is usually a work for younger boys. His uncle, a rather rich merchant, is going on a honey expedition and persuades Dukhey's mother to let the child embark with him. When they arrive, they forget to perform a *puja* to appease Dakshin Ray, who becomes furious. For a long time the party cannot find any honey, but eventually the demon appears in a dream to Dhona, the uncle, who accepts to sacrifice Dukhey

in exchange for honey. The next morning he abandons Dukhey in the forest with a petty excuse and runs away. Dakshin Ray, on seeing his prey, changes himself into a tiger and is about to attack him, when Dukhey remembers his mother's advice and calls out to Bonbibi. She arrives immediately with her brother and saves Dukhey. Thanks to the mediation of a friend called Borokhan, Dakshin Ray makes peace with Bonbibi and offers wealth to Dukhey. Meantime Dhona had gone back to the village and told Dukhey's mother that her son was dead. The youngster in fact remains in the forest in the service of Bonbibi and only later returns to his village. Here he becomes one of the leading men while Dhona is unmasked; to restore peace Dhona gives his daughter in marriage to Dukhey. The story ends with Bonbibi blessing the newly married couple.

This *Jabarnama* was published at the end of the nineteenth century by a Muslim author called Munshi Mohammed Khater of Govindapur. In his introduction, Khater reveals that the legend is not his invention, and he simply set it to verses on request of the people. Like most *puthi* (religious tales), it is written in Dobhashi Bangla, a variety of language used by Muslim religious literature and containing several Urdu and Arabic elements.

This *Jabarnama* is obviously Islamic, but the word Islamic and Hindu never appear in the text; Bonbibi is an example of how Allah is compassionate towards every creature, thus compassion and tolerance are two key virtues of the deity. However, the maternal aspect of Bonbibi and the fact that Dakhsin Ray is not discomfited but still rules on in his part of the jungle, are typical Hindu elements. Still, unlike most Hindu deities, Bonbibi does not have any affiliation with Hindus' main pantheon and their narratives. It should also be noticed that she is not venerated for salvation, but for safety, relying on her magical and

powerful characteristics rather than spirituality. Even villagers of the Sundarbans refer to her as a «Musulmani Devi»¹⁰.

Some maintain that there may also be some kind of historical truth behind the figure of Bonbibi, as the presence of Islam is historically associated with attempts to turn dense forest into cultivated areas as early as the XIII century. An interesting antecedent is the story of one Khan Jahan Ali, a Zamindar died in 1459, who reclaimed a piece of land that was turned to paddy cultivation in the Khulna district. According to the legend, he arrived from the Middle East riding two crocodiles, which makes him a *sufi* saint. His shrine is in Bagerhat (Tiger village) in Khulna. Near the shrine, lies a water tank where crocodiles live which are supposed to be the descendants of the two he rode on his coming from the Middle East. According to another version, Dakshin Rai was a Brahmin who lived in the forest and imposed taxes on the population. Soon enough his greed became so great that he took the form of a tiger and started eating humans. He became Lord of Lower Bengal¹¹ until Bonbibi came over to put him in his place.

It is easy to see behind the legend the story of a struggle against some landlord in which a *pir* played a leading role. But this is of little consequence to the Sundarbans people who worship Bonbibi, whether they are Hindus or Muslims. The teaching they distil from Bonbibi's story is of a different kind. Half of the forest belongs to Dakshin Rai by right; those who venture onto his land for sport risk his ire. Only Bonbibi can protect such people who «do the forest» for a living¹², provided they are clean in their motives, and especially they are not greedy. For this reason, organizing an expedition into the forest for either fishing, or collecting fuel, or honey is a complex matter. Men who go into the wilderness must not take from the forest more than they

¹⁰ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*.

¹¹ Annu Jalais, «Bonbibi: Bridging Worlds,” *Indian Folklife Serial* 28 (2008).

¹² Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*.

really need and must only go when they are really in need. Thus before leaving for the forest, all the cooked food which is at home must be consumed, and while someone of the family is in the forest, his relatives at home will only feed themselves on raw food. Women do not go into the forest, lest they may engender impure thoughts, but remain at home and usually wear white saris, as if they were widows. The reason for this latter custom is usually explained in two ways: the first, which is also in *The Hungry Tide*, is that chances are so high that a man will not return from the forest, that he is as well as dead the moment he leaves the village. Annu Jalais offers a more convincing explanation, linking the white sari not so much to widowhood but to the original idea that a widow must not do anything that is considered extravagant or fancy. Likewise, if a fisherman's or a honey collector's wife should wear jewels or fancy saris, she would endanger her husband, whose protection depends on his and his family's real need of the products he procures from the forest. Greed is a very tricky business; Annu Jalais recounts that, while she was doing her fieldwork, a villager lady warned her not to take more photos than she really needed, lest Dakshin Ray got jealous. Only sobriety and a clean heart can ensure the protection of the *devi* and allow the world of animals to coexist with the world of humans.

In the Sundarbans there are indeed also poachers, who are considered greedy, and therefore cannot expect Bonbibi's protection, do not believe in her power and do not worship her. They deem themselves fearless and rely on weapons rather than rituals. Fishermen and honey collectors, on the other hand, do not hide their fear, which is itself a tribute to the demon. Unlike Dukhey's uncle, they perform their pujas well before they enter the forest. The *pujaris* are not however priests, especially in the fringe areas, but specialized workers called *gunins* or *fakirs*¹³. The latter are

¹³According to Tushar K. Niyogi, there are three kinds of Bonbibi *thaans* (shrines) in villages, fringe areas and the forest. The former are usually different for Muslims and

the most effective and know the mantras (mostly of Arabic origin) which may invoke the deity. Considering the characteristic Bengali shift of the short /a/ to /o/, we may well argue that the name of Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* means exactly that. The fisherman, who performs mysterious gestures in front of the deity, uttering Arabic words much to the astonishment of uncomprehending Piya, is Fokir by name and *fakir* by call. Besides, he successfully guides Piya in the uncharted territory of the forest. *Fakirs* are supposed to be able to communicate with the source of the natural powers through their mantras; though they cannot avoid tigers, still they can ask that tigers are kept away. During an expedition, the fakir is the first to alight from the boat and the last to leave the shore.

In *The Hungry Tide*, there are two instances of Bonbibi ethics. The first is at the beginning of the journey when Nilima warns her nephew Kanai not to venture into the forest, because, unlike the others of the party, he does not have a good reason to go and *therefore* he will be in danger, Nilima argues.

«There's no reason for you to worry,» said Kanai. «I won't take any risks.»

«But Kanai, don't you see? To our way of thinking, you *are* the risk. The others are going because they need to – but not you. You're going on a whim, a *kebejal*. You don't have any pressing reason to go»¹⁴.

Hindus and they are properly maintained and looked after by Brahmins; the second species are on the fringe of the villages, less elaborated, only seldom brahmins perform there and they are used by Hindus and Muslims alike. Those in the forest are very basic and no brahmins ever perform there; the forest is the realm of a different professional of rituals called fakir or bauley or gunin. *Aspects of Folk Cults in South Bengal* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, Ministry of Human Resources Development, 1987). However no other survey of the cult of Bonbibi that I have read confirms this distinction between village and fringe *thaans*.

¹⁴ *The Hungry Tide*, 202.

This fleeting exchange becomes clearer in the light of what we have been saying about the ethics of Bonbibi, and so does the exchange at Garjontola that we have just recalled. Fokir feels the fear and is conscious that this fear is an act of submission to the deity that will therefore protect him. Kanai, on the other hand, does not share his fear, which Fokir interprets as an act of blasphemous defiance. Kanai is put to the test just like Dukhey before him, and, like Dukhey, he comes out of the forest a wiser, if sadder, man. Left on the island all alone to face the uncanny tiger, Kanai is terrorized, humbled and blessed with a kind of epiphany, whereby he perceives his position as a cosmopolitan man vis-à-vis subalterns like Fokir¹⁵. When he is finally rescued, he has learnt his lesson well; he never blames Fokir for abandoning him on the island, and decides to go home, belatedly following his aunt's recommendation. This supernatural and spiritual encounter with the divinities of the forest cures Kanai from his pride and self-centeredness, like it helped Dukhey to become a man. In his secular way also Kanai will become devoted to Bonbibi, in that he decides to come back more often to Sundarbans. As for Ghosh's poetics, he hardly ever invents things and characters, but he rather endows them with characteristics that he has observed in actual people. Mysterious and fascinating as he is to the readers' eyes, the character of Fokir is neither a subaltern stereotype nor an exotic invention, but a quintessential realistic outcome of Ghosh's own researches in the Sundarbans.

Talking about his autobiographic travelogue *In an Antique Land* in a recent interview,¹⁶ Amitav Ghosh defended the truth of what he wrote, arguing that by the time he came to write that book, he had already

¹⁵ On the use of the uncanny see Pramod K. Nayar, "The Postcolonial Uncanny; the Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", *College Literature* 37, no. 4 (2010).

¹⁶ Damien Stankiewicz, "Anthropology and Fiction: an Interview with Amitav Ghosh," *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2012).

written two novels and knew perfectly well what the difference is between fiction and non-fiction. He concludes quite categorically: «I can tell you this with absolute certainty: nothing in *Antique Land* is invented». Although a novel by any other standard, *The Hungry Tide*, could lay the same claim. Even though a kind of delicacy has probably refrained the author from offering Fokir's point of view anywhere in the novel, the *Weltanschauung* of this character as well as his beliefs and his set of values must have been very clear to his creator, like those of Piya or Kanai. It is through their reaction to the common emotion of fear – indeed as common as water in the Sundarbans – that the novel points out cultural differences and human analogies.