

## AMITAV GHOSH'S *JUNGLE NAMA* Writing Beyond the Novel

ALESSANDRO VESCOVI  
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO

**Abstract** – The publication of *Jungle Nama* (2021) marks a new turn in Amitav Ghosh's poetics. The author moves from his own studies in environmental humanities to question the aesthetics of the novel and to reevaluate the vitalism of peasants' traditions, which he opposes to Western rationalism. With *Jungle Nama* the author turns to verse and myth to admonish and set an example of respect for the non-human. From an aesthetical viewpoint, Ghosh transposes the narrative from the traditional Bengali versions to the language and media of world literature and world arts. The result is what we call the Jungle Nama Project, where visual art, music, literature, philology, and drama come together to disrupt the epistemological dominance of the Western forms.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh; *Jungle Nama*; environmental activism; ecosophy; myth.

### 1. Amitav Ghosh and deep ecology

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009) describes his ecosophy as ecological awareness and activism based on ultimate premises, be they philosophical or religious. Rooting ecological thought in such foundations is the hallmark of deep ecology. The depth of deep ecology consists in its roots, the unseen, somewhat private portion of the system, which nourishes the whole. Ecosophy is called thus because it blends some tenets of ecology – like complexity, diversity, and symbiosis – with philosophical, possibly metaphysical, premises. Everyone who develops an ecosophy will base it on different premises, according to one's culture and individual experiences; thus, ecosophy is, to an extent, flexible and grants the value of diversity even within the ecological movement. A personal ecosophy may be grounded in a religious creed, philosophical system, or even a place; Naess's own brand of ecosophy is famously called "Ecosophy T" because it was developed in a mountain hut called Tvergastein. Naess explains how the connection with that particular place shaped his ecological understanding in a long essay on the value of Place (Naess 2005, see esp. pp. 339-360). According to the author, this layered philosophical system originated thanks to a mountain hike he took as a teenager and in the wild mountains around Tvergastein, which he came to love later in his life (Rothenberg 1989, p. 2).

Amitav Ghosh has never described himself as a deep ecologist, and yet his commitment to environmental issues and to the assessment of the individual identity within the environment is a perfect example of ecosophy. As with Arne Naess, Ghosh's brand of ecosophy is rooted in a place – the Sundarbans. His environmental activism began when he wrote *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Indeed, one could define Ghosh's environmental philosophy as "Ecosophy S", after the Sundarbans. Ghosh visited the lagoon as a child thanks to an uncle of his who was a headmaster and the administrator of Sir Hamilton's foundation (Vescovi 2009). When he set out to write the novel, he visited the place again, staying with fishermen and villagers. He also sought the help of an anthropologist, Annu Jalais, then a PhD student, who would later become a major authority on the archipelago. Ghosh pays his debt to her in the acknowledgements of the novel and by dedicating to her his *Jungle Nama* years later. Possibly the anthropologist of French origin has also inspired the character of Paulette in the *Ibis* trilogy.

Ecosophy leads in two different directions: self-analysis to discover one's place in the cosmos, and activism to promote a more sustainable lifestyle (Rothenberg 1989, p. 4). While Arne Naess developed an ethic from his ecosophy, Ghosh has planned an aesthetic, which is likewise a basis for his activism. Both Naess and Ghosh believe that the human/nature dichotomy should be overcome as the boundary between humans and non-humans is an artificial construct. In *The Great Derangement* (2016) and in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh disputes the unethical idea that the Earth is there to be exploited and the epistemological underlying tenet that the non-human world is inert, ontologically inferior to human life, devoid of agency and communicative power.

## 2. Ecosophical aesthetics

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh complains that the so-called serious novel appears inadequate to represent the non-human agency. Twin brother of rationalism, the realistic novel is mostly unable to depict whatever reality is not sanctioned by the rationalist, scientific, originally Western discourse. Ghosh wonders why it turns out so difficult for serious realistic fiction – Franco Moretti's definition (2001) – to deal with climate change. His reasoning is well known and very articulated; suffice it to recall that one possible answer to this question about the irrepresentability of climate change depends on its uniqueness. Novels, Ghosh contends, are perceived as realistic not so much because of the truth of what they describe, but because of the probability of the incidents they narrate. When they tell of an unprecedented event, they appear flawed, no matter how possible the event can be. Consider for instance a story told by the Italian war writer Mario Rigoni Stern in his memoir *Il sergente*

*della neve* [*The Sergeant in the Snow*] (1953). The former *alpino* recounts that after a fierce battle on the banks of the river Don, from which he came out unscathed, he found a bullet stuck on the tip of his bayonet. A narrow escape that paradoxically sounds more credible in a biography than it would in a novel. In a novel such a story could suit Ann Radcliffe or Charles Dickens, but not George Eliot or Joseph Conrad. Climate change is so unprecedented in human experience that it sounds as unlikely as the tip of a bayonet stopping a lethal bullet.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh alleges that he has never been able to utilise in his fiction an extreme weather event that he encountered in Delhi as a young man because it was so unique that it would not sound believable in a novel: “Oddly enough, no tornado has ever figured in my novels. Nor is this due to any lack of effort on my part” (Ghosh 2016, p. 20). Yet he utilises it in the essay! The Bengali author connects this rejection of unlikely events to the episteme set up by rationalist thought. The bourgeois hero of the novel is rational and mostly secular, or such is at least the implied author of realistic novels. Even deeply religious authors of realistic fiction do not rely on an interventionist god. Lucia in *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] (1827-1842) is a case in point; although Alessandro Manzoni was very pious, his novel offers diverse human explanations to the Innominato’s conversion, which cast doubt on the actual value of Lucia’s vow to the Virgin Mary. Novels that portray supernatural forces, Ghosh argues, are pushed to the margins of serious fiction, like gothic or sci-fi, and are therefore useless to create an environmental consciousness.

At a book launch at the University of Turin in 2016, someone asked Ghosh if he meant to write a novel that would take up the challenge of representing the climate crisis. The novelist smiled and said that he was not ready to do that because ideological literature, he claimed, is mostly of poor quality. Two years later he would publish his most experimental fictional work to date, *Gun Island*, which begins in the Sundarbans and explores the connection between climate change and migration, heavily relying on unlikely coincidences and using the Bengali myth of Manasa Devi, a sylvan deity, as a subtext. According to the myth, Manasa Devi persecutes a merchant who refuses to believe in her power pursuing him all over the world, until he gives in and recognises her divinity. Arguably Ghosh has been developing a poetic that endeavours to mirror the complexity, diversity, and symbiotic life of the Sundarbans *in primis*, and then of the whole world, by refashioning an old myth.

*Gun Island*’s bold defiance of realistic conventions clearly testifies to Ghosh’s impatience with the restraints of serious fiction both on an artistic and political level. On the artistic level, he bends the rules of statistical probability almost to a breaking point, mostly through coincidences that may happen but rarely in real life. On the political level, he indicts the epistemic tyranny of

rationalism by offering interpretations and world views that challenge the Western rationalist discourse.

In his recent book-long essay *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Ghosh points out how vitalist religions of nature have been repressed, sometimes ferociously, to impose a lifestyle that consumes and exploits natural resources regardless of their renewability. He further argues that vitalist religions are more respectful of the environment and more inclusive as they do not tend to create a hierarchy of beings, which inevitably turns out to be racist and classist.

In the past, Ghosh had put up little resistance to the secular tyranny of the probable and had included only a few uncanny events that were left without rational explanation in otherwise secular narratives. The elephant anecdote in *The Glass Palace* (2000, pp. 97-103) or Kanai's encounter with the tiger on the island of Garjontola in *The Hungry Tide* (2004, pp. 320-329) are both cases in point which involve other-than-human agencies; still they remain isolated episodes with little consequence on the respective plots.

This change in the narrative technique becomes crucial as Ghosh's ecosophical aesthetic addresses two fundamental ethical questions: how can the novelist be consistent with the intellectual and environmental campaigner? And more importantly: how to tell stories without colluding with the rationalism implied by the form of the novel? The simplest way out of the quandary would be to abandon realism and turn to fantasy (actually 're-turn' as Ghosh authored a science fiction in the 1990s). However, he does not want to sever the connection between fiction and reality, because that would push the climate crisis into the realm of some Middle-earth. On the contrary, he aims to remove constraints at the aesthetic level and emancipate realistic fiction from rationalism at the epistemological level. This emancipation will pave the way to the conception of a different *Weltanschauung*.

### 3. Turning to myth

Ghosh pushes his experimentation even further with *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021).<sup>1</sup> The author becomes even more radical as he decides to renounce the realistic medium and tell the story of Bon Bibi (literally 'lady of the forest'), a founding myth of the Sundarbans people. Interestingly a prose translation of Bon Bibi's legend filled a chapter in *The Hungry Tide*, which may be read as a poetical encyclopedia of the Sundarbans and would not be complete without a reference to the deity's myth. In the narrative fiction, a Bengali professional translator renders the story for an American woman he

<sup>1</sup> Ghosh chooses the singular Bengali form *Sundarban*, while in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* he uses the more frequent *Sundarbans*. Possibly he wants to retain the original meaning 'beautiful forest' considering the archipelago as a place or forest rather than the sum of many islands. In this essay, however, we shall follow the English norm.

loves alleging that it will be easier for her to understand the people of the Sundarbans if she knows the legend. This way of incorporating the story into the novel is typically secular. Both the goddess worshippers and the story itself are mentioned, as it were, within inverted commas and offered to the benevolent secular rationalistic gaze of world readers as an anthropological curiosity. The twists in the legend's plot and the narrative ingenuity are there to be marvelled at, but not really shared by the secular middle-class intended readership. Thus, seventeen years after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh boldly abandons the inverted commas and the realistic mode of representation and offers an 'illuminated' rendition in verse. While in *The Hungry Tide* he showcased the story of Bon Bibi, in *Jungle Nama* he endorses it. Arguably this aesthetic decision amounts to a political choice, the equivalent of a boycott campaign.

For his rendition, Ghosh adopted an English adaptation of the *dwipodi poyar*, a Bengali folk metre of twelve syllables couplets, which he had silently imitated in the chapter of *The Hungry Tide* mentioned above. Thus, he eschews traditional English metres based on feet and strives to impart to his text the rhythm of Bengali folk ballads. The position of the accents is irrelevant to this particular metre (D'Hubert 2018), and the rhymes are sometimes just assonances; however, the rhythmical cadence is granted by the absence of enjambments, the occasional caesuras, and the even number of syllables.

Dukhey's mother thus describes the magic of the metre:

[the *dwipodi poyar*]  
 will give your voice wings, it's the metre of wonder;  
 Its cadence will strengthen your words; they'll gain in power;  
 It'll work its magic by tying your thoughts together;  
 Into couplets of twenty-four syllables,  
 That sometimes rhyme, sometimes use half-rhymed vocables.  
 (Ghosh 2021b, p. 24)

The discipline required by rhyming is itself a kind of *tapa* ('penance', 'austerity') that enhances the supplicant's claim and binds the goddess.

The story recounts the adventure of Dhona, a greedy merchant who goes into the forest of Dokkhin Rai, the tiger-demon, to collect honey and wax with a disproportionate number of boats. The demon appears to him in a dream and grants him the valuable commodities on condition that he gives up his teen-aged nephew Dukhey for his prey. Dhona accepts the deal and sails back home leaving the boy to his destiny. When Dukhey believes he is lost, he remembers that his mother told him to pray to Bon Bibi in case he was in trouble. Although frightened, he finds the right words to summon her. The goddess's brother beats Dokkhin Rai, and the boy goes home astride a crocodile laden with Bon Bibi's gifts. As he arrives, he forgives his uncle, who procures him a bride, with whom he lives happily ever after. In one of the Bengali texts, Dukhey

even marries Dhona's daughter. One interesting detail of the legend is that Bon Bibi and her brother have flown from Mecca to the Sundarbans to restrain Dokkhin Rai's power. As Annu Jalais (2010, pp. 65-108) explains in the fifth chapter of her book, Bon Bibi is venerated both by Muslims and Hindus who work in the jungle. She protects both humans and tigers. Her myth offers diversion when recounted or staged, protection when the lines are chanted in a puja, and moral guidance when meditated upon.

In his rendition, Ghosh foregrounds three details: Dhona's greed, Dukhey's discipline, and Bon Bibi's equanimity. While in the original story, Dhona decides to sacrifice his nephew in cold blood, in Ghosh's *nama*, he only accepts the deal when he is told that if he does not, his entire crew will be lost. Dhona's violence is not directed primarily at the boy but at nature. His greed initially appears harmless, but eventually turns out to be destructive. Dukhey, though not significantly wise himself, is rewarded for his piety and discipline, his wisdom consisting chiefly in knowing his limits. His mother is very particular in telling him that he must invoke Bon Bibi with the right metre. After winning her battle, Bon Bibi asks Dukhey to forgive his uncle, while she does not slay the tiger-demon, but on the contrary assigns to him a portion of the forest, where he can be king. The former anthropological curiosity has become a lesson, not in anthropology but in ecological wisdom. The *nama* exposes global readers to a different culture, a different way of writing and thinking. Here Ghosh does not expound upon the causes or effects of climate change, but brings his readers back to the point where rationalist discourse and poetical, natural discourses diverged, pointing out the necessity to think differently and heed native lore. This change of paradigm calls for a medium other than the prose of rationalism and scientific discourses. Although the myth describes Dokkhin Rai in the guise of a tiger and Bon Bibi in that of a benevolent sylvan deity, Ghosh's attention is on the agency of the non-human and the way it communicates in non-human language. The metre itself, relying on sounds and patterns rather than syntax and lexis is Ghosh's attempt at undermining Western logocentrism. Ghosh sums up the message of the myth in the closing lines of the poem:

All you need do, is be content with what you've got;  
 to be always craving more, is a demon's lot.  
 A world of endless appetite is a world possessed,  
 is what your munshi learned, by way of his quest.  
 (Ghosh 2021b, p. 70)

The use of the term *munshi* in the last line of the poem is beguiling. The word, which means 'clerk', 'scribe', or 'translator', appears often in the *Ibis* trilogy. Arguably Ghosh is referring to himself as a translator and a student who also has learnt a lesson in his quest. It is one of the many Persian or Arabic words that Ghosh has woven into his text (Biswas 2022, p. 238), following the model

of the extant versions of Bon Bibi's myth that abound in Arabic lexis. Not only has he translated the legend into another language: he has brought Bon Bibi's wisdom to a worldwide audience and other media endowing it with a new meaning. However, the two extant versions of the legend are themselves metrical translations of former oral myths, and myths are a translation of what the land itself would say. This new version needs the discipline of a metre because it cannot expect to rely on the syntax of rational human discourse, it must reach out to something less rational and more profound than that.

Ghosh is quite explicit about this interpretation in his afterword to the poem:

The planetary crisis has upturned a vast range of accustomed beliefs and expectations, among them many that pertain to literature and literary forms. In the Before Times, stories like this one would have been considered child-like, and thus fare for children. But today, it is increasingly clear that such stories are founded on a better understanding of the human predicament than many narratives that are considered serious and adult. (Ghosh 2021b, p. 77)

#### 4. Multimodal *nama*

The story of Bon Bibi does not exist solely as a printed text. As the readers of *The Hungry Tide* know, bright-coloured Bon Bibi terracotta images are found throughout the Sundarbans, where they receive daily worship. Furthermore, the *Bon Bibir Johuranama* [The story of the glory of Bon Bibi] is often enacted as *jatra*, a kind of folk theatre typical of Bengal, especially in the month of January. The performance, which lasts a few hours, usually focuses on the last and most dramatic part of the story, namely that of Dukhey, which has been chosen by Ghosh, too. In the shrines scattered all over the Sundarbans, Bon Bibi is often represented sitting on a tiger together with her brother Shah Jangoli (master of the forest) and Dukhey. This is also the position that actors customarily assume at the end of the performance.

Also the text of *Jungle Nama* does not aim at the empyreal self-sufficiency of the poetical word on the white page. Ghosh's verse is 'illuminated' by the drawings of Salman Toor, a Pakistani artist based in New York. The drawings are not simply an embellishment of the printed word, but a further interpretation of the legend. A further collaboration with Ali Sethi has endowed the *nama* with a soundscape, recorded in an audiobook (Ghosh 2021c), which is not simply a reading of the couplets, but a recitation to which Ali Sethi has added background music and short refrains that highlight some moments in the narrative like a Greek chorus. One could argue that Sethi's music is to the recited text what Toor's images are to the printed one.

As if the textual avatars were not enough, *Jungle Nama* has also been transformed into a musical by Brooke O'Harra, an American freelance director

who worked with Ghosh and Sethi involving the students of Penn University, where she teaches drama (Ghosh 2022). Both the music and the text have been adapted for the stage by the authors. Ghosh brought to a world audience the myth of Bon Bibi with its translated words, translated images, and translated music and theatre. The production is available on the Internet followed by a meeting with the authors and artists.

Needless to say, commercially speaking the Jungle Nama Project is a hazardous enterprise. Ghosh is an acclaimed realistic world literature novelist; his readers are hardly the readers of narrative poems and few of them are habitual readers of graphic novels. Besides, there is never knowing how Hindu fundamentalists would take his rewriting coupled with non-traditional tableaux and his collaboration with Pakistani artists.

## 5. A collective enterprise

The choice of collaborators for the Jungle Nama Project deserves some consideration. Both Salman Toor and Ali Sethi are young Pakistani artists living in New York. Working with them means to bridge the Hindu and Muslim worlds, much like the legend of Bon Bibi does.

As we have seen, the story of Bon Bibi has a well-established iconographic tradition that informs Indian retellings. For some time, a children's book has been in circulation recounting the story of Bon Bibi with images that recall the *patachitra* style.<sup>2</sup> The volume is available in several languages, including English; it has appeared in a series called "Our Myths", which purports to "draw upon timeless stories from popular and marginal sources to gently question stereotypes and rigid notions" (Rao, Roy 2011, back cover). The book, which has gone through several reprints, is published in Chennai, quite far from Bengal and the Sundarbans, and testifies to the popularity of the myth within India.

In planning his version, Ghosh took a completely different approach. He decided to ignore Indian traditional iconography, asking Salman Toor to draw the accompanying pictures. Salman Toor is known for his portrayals of lonely queer characters in dilapidated environs. To me he is reminiscent of Edward Hopper and Ravi Varma for their strokes, mood and palette. In Toor's portraits, facial expressions are fundamental. On the contrary, no face is ever portrayed in *Jungle Nama*, probably out of respect for the Islamic tradition that forbids the representation of religious images. What remains of Toor's paintings in *Jungle Nama* is their tormented features, which have no equivalent in the traditional folk style. Besides, probably to cut costs, all the tables are in black and white. Indeed, mostly black and grey. In fact, the only white figure in the

<sup>2</sup> *Patachitra* (literally 'painting on cloth') is a typical folk style from Orisha and Bengal, which mostly represents mythical characters with vivid colours and black outlines.



book is Dukhey's mother, who wears a white sari to mark her widowhood and frugality. Her whiteness appears to shed light on the characters around her. It also highlights the connection between women and nature, or the role of women as preservers and interpreters of nature, which surfaces also in the legend of Manasa Devi that underlies *Gun Island* (Sengupta 2022a) and in the short story *The Living Mountain* (2022). Interestingly, in Toor's illustrations, white is also used for the eyes of wild animals, as if a deep connection existed between the widow and jungle animals. According to Sulagna Sengupta (2022b), the chiaroscuro mirrors the duality between animal and human domains. Dokkhin Ray, however, is ambivalent in that he symbolises and elicits greed (which is typically human), but is also the protector of the forest. Throughout the text, smaller images are scattered without a precise connection with any episode. In particular, two images keep surfacing – fire and birds. The former may be connected with the burning appearance of the tiger (as William Blake first suggested), but also with the destructive power of greed. Ghosh sums it up in a haiku-like couplet:

The tiger's stripes that had danced like the flames of a fire,  
now fell still, the embers of a fading pyre.  
(Ghosh 2021b, p. 5)

Birds, on the contrary, may signal an escape, a desire to rise above the grim situation.

It is difficult to say why Ghosh decided against the traditional painting and had the legend drawn in a postmodern fashion. Arguably, however, the stylistic choice is in keeping with the political stance of the whole project. Ghosh utilises his status as world literature writer to offer visibility to a kind of alternative relationship with the environment. *Jungle Nama* is a translation that is bringing to a world audience something that would otherwise be confined to Bengali peasant classes only. A sweeping comment from Kanai, the character who translates this same legend in *The Hungry Tide*, is revealing:

Such flaws that are in my rendition [of Bon Bibi's legend] I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight, as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible. (Ghosh 2004, p. 232)

After all, Ghosh seems to argue, it is well to point out that one is reading a translation and has no unmediated access to the original. Besides, the text with its subtle references to the *Ibis* trilogy (especially to lascars and sailing) and to *Gun Island* (especially in the words of Dukhey leaving his mother to go abroad like so many other young men) refers to Ghosh as a career author.<sup>3</sup> It is as if

<sup>3</sup> Booth (1977, p. 11) suggests the term *career author* to point to the whole oeuvre of an author as opposed to the single person or the implied author of any given text.

*Jungle Nama* contained much of the novelistic and essayist work of the author in a nutshell. The iconographic apparatus of *Jungle Nama* ‘translates’ folk iconography into the language of world art like Ghosh translates Bengali into the language of world literature – his own stylised brand of standard English. In so doing, Ghosh and Toor achieve a double goal: on the one hand, they reclaim a culture and a *Weltanschauung* that have been marginalised by the mainstream rationalistic episteme. On the other hand, they assert the necessity of revising the paradigms that regulate our relationship with the non-human sphere, starting from world literature. The translation of the legend of Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide* is locutionary in that it simply informs world readers of the existence of the legend and its importance to the people of the Sundarbans. *Jungle Nama*, on the contrary, is illocutionary in that it asserts the importance of the legend of Bon Bibi not only for the people of the Sundarbans, but for all the inhabitants of what he calls “a planet in crisis.” Arguably, it is also perlocutionary in that it invites readers to reflect upon their attitude to the environment and take action.

The audiobook offers the text in yet another garb. Ali Sethi is a musician trained in Urdu classical music who has experimented with world music and has been acclaimed for his chart-topper “Pasoori”, performed with Shae Gill. Sethi attended one of Amitav Ghosh’s courses in creative writing and put it to profit with his novel *The Wish Maker* (2009). His musical interpretation of the audiobook keeps the cosmopolitan style of the project. The music is played with traditional percussions, like the music from the subcontinent, as well as flutes and, sometimes, slightly distorted electric guitars. He sings in several languages including Urdu, Bengali, and English. Interestingly, the lyrics are not taken verbatim from the text, but have been written ad hoc, except for some passages of a traditional Bengali folk song. During the recitation, Sethi utilises the percussions to highlight some dramatic passages and wind instruments to underline dramatic events, deftly alternating major and minor keys.

As in the case of Toor, the music emphasises the mood of the characters and creates connections between different parts of the story that might be lost in the printed text. In fact, while the silent reading of the text reminds one of a poem, the added music transforms it into a ballad with refrains and incremental repetitions, which help to highlight keywords like *leaving* (with the iambic pattern of “chaló chaló, let’s go let’s go”), *greed* (“more, more, more”), and *sobriety* (“daal and rice”), and the melancholy plight of the protagonist (“Dukhey Dukhey”).

Sethi’s music has been used to turn *Jungle Nama* into a musical. Unfortunately, budget limitations have prevented it from hitting Broadway, and the production has remained at the level of semi-professional college performance. In this avatar, *Jungle Nama* lost most of its narrative lines and was transformed into a series of dialogues. The director, Brooke O’Harra created a contamination of Oriental and Western theatre, mixing ballet to

Bharata Natyam, Western and Indian clothes. Each actor plays more than one part, regardless of the characters' gender, and some actors also play musical instruments on stage. Ali Sethi plays and sings live. One of the most interesting devices of the *mise en scène* is the way the tiger is performed not by one actor only, but by a group of actors who either speak in unison or in turns. Even this device sheds some light on the evanescent character of the tiger-demon, strong and powerful, and yet ethereal. On the whole, the staging is reminiscent of Peter Brook's production of the Mahabharata, with its international cast. Like Peter Brook, Ghosh, Sethi, and O'Harra have amplified a local myth to bear upon all humans. As in the case of Peter Brook, one might discuss the issue of cultural appropriation, except that Ghosh is Indian, Sethi is Pakistani and the whole myth of Bon Bibi bridges Hindu and Muslim worlds. In fact, the representation of the Sundarbans through the medium of the realist novel, as in the case of *The Hungry Tide*, is an appropriation of the magic of the Sundarbans by a Western medium, which selects and describes through prose. The Jungle Nama Project, on the contrary, does not rely only on Western media, it brings the contamination, which is the hallmark of the myth, to a planetary level.

## 6. Conclusion

The Jungle Nama Project testifies to Ghosh's deep ecological thought and to his commitment to the environment. The Sundarbans offer a starting point both for his ethics and aesthetics. In *The Hungry Tide*, he translated the archipelago into a novel through invented stories, library research, field observations, and the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. With *Jungle Nama*, he abandons the anthropological gaze and becomes an activist. The whole project is a way to raise public awareness on the limits of the Western episteme, rationalism, and reductionism, promoting the values of those civilisations that stand closest to natural processes and attune their lives to the rhythms and demands of the Earth. Experience has taught him the greatest respect for this kind of knowledge.

While Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* was a cultural endeavour driven by aesthetic motives aimed at sharing the beauty and wisdom of the Indian poem with his audience, Ghosh's project is an example of cultural activism. The story of the glory of Bon Bibi is important not only for its beauty, but for the values that it upholds and the relationship between humans and non-humans that it fosters. While Brooks translated the Mahabharata into the semiotic system he knew best – that of twentieth-century English theatre – Ghosh has gone out of his way to experiment with new fashions to translate the myth so that it may reach the widest possible audience: verse writing, images, music, theatre. Unable to draw or compose music himself, he has sought out collaborators who

could help him in his undertaking, keeping the South-Asian core and adding layers of meaning that would make it understandable the world over.

**Bionote:** Alessandro Vescovi is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Milan. His main interests are the Victorian novel and Indian writing in English. He is the author of a monograph on the short story as a genre (1999), a volume on Amitav Ghosh (2012), a book on Hinduism and the novel (2023), and of several articles on Indian writers. Among the most recent are “A man is what he eats (and what he doesn’t). On the use of traditional food culture in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*” (*Consonanze*, 2018), “Emplotting the Postcolonial: Epistemology and Narratology in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*” (*ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 2017), and “Poetics of the Teenager in Indian Millennial Fiction” (*Textus*, 2020). He has co-edited *The Topicality of the Shadow Lines* (*Quadri*, 2020, with Esterino Adami and Carmen Concilio) and *Amitav Ghosh’s Culture Chromosome* (Brill, 2021, with Asis De). He is part of the board of postcolonial journals and secretary of the Italian Association for the Study of Anglophone Cultures and Literatures (AISCLI).

**Author’s address:** [alessandro.vescovi@unimi.it](mailto:alessandro.vescovi@unimi.it)

## References

- Biswas S. 2022, *Jungle Nama: Ghosh's adaptation of a mystic folktale from the Sundarbans*, in "Journal of Social and Economic Development" 24 [1], pp. 237-239.
- Booth W. 1977, *For the Authors*, in "Novel: A Forum on Fiction" 11 [1], pp. 5-19.
- D'Hubert T. 2018, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Ghosh A. 2000, *The Glass Palace*, HarperCollins, London.
- Ghosh A. 2004, *The Hungry Tide*, HarperCollins, London.
- Ghosh A. 2016, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL).
- Ghosh A. 2021a, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, John Murray, London.
- Ghosh A. 2021b, *Jungle Nama. A Story of the Sundarban*, Fourth Estate, Delhi.
- Ghosh A. 2021c, *Jungle Nama, A Story of the Sundarban*, Sethi A. (narr.) [audiobook], John Murray, London.
- Ghosh A. 2022, *Jungle Nama. A Story of the Sundarban*, O'Harra B. (dir.), Sethi A. (comp.) [musical performance], Montgomery Theater at Penn Live Arts, Philadelphia (PA). <https://vimeo.com/727108475> (23.3.2023).
- Jalais A. 2010, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*, Routledge, New Delhi.
- Moretti F. 2001, *Il secolo serio*, in Moretti F. (ed.), *Il romanzo. La cultura del romanzo*, Einaudi, Torino, pp. 688-725.
- Naess A. 2005, *The Significance of Place: At Home in the Mountains*, in Glasser H. and Drengson A. (eds.), *The Selected Works of Arne Naess. Vol. X Deep Ecology of Wisdom*, Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 337-378.
- Rao S. and Proiti R. 2011, *In Bon Bibi's Forest, Our Myths*, Tulika, Chennai.
- Rigoni Stern M. 1953, *Il sergente nella neve. Ricordi della ritirata di Russia*, Einaudi, Torino.
- Rothenberg D. 1989, *Introduction: Ecosophy T – from Intuition to System*, in Naess A. and Rothenberg D. (eds.), *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1-22.
- Sengupta S. 2022a, *An Ecofeminist Reading of Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama*, in Khuraijam G. (ed.), *Exploring Gender Studies and Feminism through Literature and Media*, IGI Global, Hershey (PA), pp. 106-112.
- Sengupta S. 2022b, *Rethinking Ecology: Myth, Meter and Measure in Jungle Nama*, in "Journal of Analytical Psychology" 67 [5], pp. 1497-1504.
- Vescovi A. 2009, *Amitav Ghosh in Conversation*, in "ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature" 40 [4], pp. 129-141.