

## **Ecofeminism during Pandemic: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's Sundarbans Trilogy**

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**ABSTRACT:** *As a distinguished novelist and an eminent anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh exhibits his deepest concern about the inability of the present generation to deal with the crisis of climate change in literature. In The Great Derangement, he forecasts the looming disaster that may arise from such carelessness. His Sundarbans trilogy (The Hungry Tide, Jungle Nama, Gun Island) surpasses all his previous works as he combines his personal voice with a factual and accurate description of the mangrove forest. In his novels, he notes that the emission of carbon dioxide, discharge of dangerous levels of methane, greenhouses gases by some developed countries, and the resulting rise of sea levels increase the frequency of natural disasters that jeopardize the natural phenomenon of the Sundarbans-the biggest mangrove forest of the world. Thus, Ghosh's novels are intended to play a significant role in raising South Asian consciousness about climate change at a time when the pandemic becomes a life-threatening issue for the whole region. In Gun Island, Ghosh forebodes scarcity and pandemics due to ecological disruption that may result in migration in the both natural and human worlds. The Covid-19 pandemic is but one of the most recent disasters to ravage the entire world. As a South Asian writer, Ghosh also highlights the doubly threatened situation of women in this region that arises from natural calamities. The pandemic has made us worried about the repression of nature and women in particular. Thus ecofeminism, a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women, is a thriving branch of academic research now. The joint oppression of women and nature is not a natural connection but a constructed connection that has been created by patriarchy as a means of oppression. In this paper I will show how an appreciation of the connection between women and the natural world and an understanding of ecofeminism that advocates their liberation during the pandemic period can enhance strategies of action for change. The trilogy tends to reveal the light of his seminal work The Great Derangement and his published interviews as well as his nonfictional works.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ecofeminism, Pandemic, Amitav Ghosh's Sundarbans Trilogy

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### **INTRODUCTION**

An anthropologist, as well as a novelist, Amitav Ghosh exhibits his deepest concern about ecological imbalance and its consequences in the Anthropocene in his fictional and non-fictional works. In his books, he warns that destruction of the protective ozone layer, overcutting of the

world's remaining great forests, extinction of plants and animals, overfishing, and toxic poisoning of the world's oceans constantly threaten our environmental balance. These destructive trends leave an increasing number of people in poverty and hopelessness. In his seminal work, *The Great Derangement* Ghosh posits that the majority of the potential victims of ecological disparity live in Asia. The Bengal Delta formed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra is one of the most densely populated areas of the world which is frequently ravaged by the "world's worst disaster" (119). In his Sundarbans Trilogy (*The Hungry Tide*, *Jungle Nama* and *Gun Island*) Ghosh painstakingly portrays ecological imbalance and its effects on humans and animals. Due to the adverse impact of climate change on the people of this area, they are at risk of fulfilling their fundamental needs. According to a report of the Inter-Governmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) under the United Nations (UN) lack of sufficient food, attack on public health, and destruction of homes and properties due to cumulative natural disasters narrow down the income source of the people which increase social and gender discrepancy (Prothom Alo 7, 1/3/2022). Among the 330 million people out of 360 million in the world are under the threat of ecological imbalance. Due to gender discrepancy, women are in more vulnerable positions than men. Public health risks often cause pandemics which makes their life more susceptible. In the Sundarbans Trilogy Ghosh exhibits some female characters whose lives are threatened by climate change. His nonfictional works indicate that sheer negligence to overcome such oppression of nature and women may result in a catastrophic end. This paper will highlight an appreciation of the connection between women and the natural world and an understanding of ecofeminism that advocates their liberation during the pandemic period which can enhance strategies of action for change.

### **Pandemic and Ecofeminism:**

Comparing natural disasters due to human-induced climate change with pandemics, Sudeep Sen, an Indian poet, asserts in his book *Anthropocene*:

At nearly 50°C, you do not need a  
Pandemic to remind you of human  
agony and grief —you inhabit one (Newsreel 66)

Such high temperature induced by the destruction of the ozone layer is compared to any pandemic situation. Similarly, continuous greenhouse emissions in the country would result in the weather in extreme heat and humidity that may in turn cause cyclones. As Sen describes it:

Cyclone Amphan razes the eastern  
seaboard—devastation—no power,  
flood, disease, millions homeless,  
    millions quarantined.

Or

After the storm, when the rains diminish  
to a soft drizzle, the showers on the  
big-leafed trees echo and murmur. Or  
is it the distant sound of approaching?  
pestilence swarms?

Indeed, Amphan slammed into the coastal districts of West Bengal, India, and then entered Bangladesh on 20 May 2020. It affected more than a million people in nine districts in the Khulna and Barisal divisions of Bangladesh and many more in India. The aftermath of the storm was a scarcity of food and disease that also hit the lives of many people. The poet beautifully states how the storm-ravaged local areas and turned human life paralyzed. They lost their refuge and were isolated from the rest of the world. Even the repercussion of such a natural disaster is terrible. It has a traumatic effect on the survivors who even hear the approach of the pandemic in the murmuring sounds of a gentle breeze. Thus, Sen draws a close connection between pandemics and natural disasters.

Such natural disasters and pandemics are not merely unanticipated, they are uncanny. In *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* Ghosh presents instances of natural calamities such as storms and floods resulting in death and destruction. As Ghosh avers in *The Great Derangement*, “And it appears that we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normality, highly improbable, flash floods, hundred-years storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes, and yes, freakish tornadoes” (Ghosh 32). Such disasters are even more devastating for women in the community as they are already less privileged and suppressed in a male-dominated society. As Ghosh asserts “As recently as 1991, a cyclone in Bangladesh resulted in 1,38,000 dead, of whom 90 percent were women” (119). In his Sundarbans Trilogy Ghosh portrays some female characters who are as degraded as nature is. The life of Kusum is oppressed by the same ideology that “sanctions the oppression of nature” (Gaard 1). Kusum, the daughter of a poor day laborer of Sundarbans was killed by a tiger attack.

### **Ecofeminism and *The Hungry Tide*:**

In the essay “Mediating Climate Change: Ecocriticism, Science Studies and *The Hungry Tide*” Adam Trexler labels the novel “a canonical text for environmental critics” (210). Located in the Indian mangrove forest the novel is preoccupied with the preservation of both human and nonhuman animal interests.

The relationship between humans and non-humans is the most fundamental question of green studies. According to Laurence Coup, the question will inevitably lead to the philosophical theme of “dualism”. In the introduction of his book *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* Coup mentions Plumwood who first notes that nature has been subordinated to ‘the master subject’ since the time of Plato and “This story privileges male over female just as it privileges reason over nature” (119). According to the philosophy of dualism, a female nature is always dominated and exploited by ‘the master subject’. Thus, women and nature are intricately connected in modes of oppression.

In order to find a kinship between women and nature, Greta Gaard asserts in her book *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* that ecofeminism “explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction” (18). The exploitation of nature is closely

connected to men's attitude to women. The interconnectedness of women and nature is vividly depicted in *The Hungry Tide*. The parallel stories of Piya's project on marine mammals in mangrove forests and the school headmaster Nirmal's diary about the pathetic life of the refugees of Marichjhapi, particularly the tragedy of Kusum's life, exhibit the connection between females and nature and demonstrate "how a 'female' nature has been systematically degraded, dominated and exploited" (Coupe 120). Piya, an American scientist, alienated from her ancestral home, Kusum, a local girl of Sundarbans, as well as Nilima, an NGO administrator, all make interesting connections between women and nature.

Piya, the cetologist, once came to the Sundarbans to do a survey of the marine mammals of the area as the water of this delta basin was suitable for both Irrawaddy and Gangetic dolphins and many other species. The unusually varied composition of saline and freshwater is the reason for the proliferation of aquatic life. The pools of dolphins are also a natural habitat of crabs. They are an important part of the Sundarbans. Acknowledging their contribution to the forest Ghosh mentions in *The Hungry Tide* they keep "the mangrove alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them, the trees would choke and on their own debris" (142). Thus, they become the keystone species of the entire ecosystem. There are more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole of Europe. The people of these areas earn their living mostly by catching fish and crabs and by collecting honey.

But the over excessive amount of fishing and ecological imbalance due to global warming has decreased the number of fishes and crabs. The ecological change is depicted by Nirmal, a headmaster of a school of Lusibari, thus "The birds were vanishing; the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much – a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough" (215). Such ecological imbalance is going to destroy the flora and fauna of the forest. Wildlife is under threat. Similar to the lives of non-human animals, human beings have also been experiencing catastrophic change.

Kusum, a "spirited, tough, and full of fun and laughter" woman of the Sundarbans, becomes an embodiment of the degraded female character of the archipelago. Born in a small village named Satjila had moved to Lusibari after her father's death due to a tiger attack. She became a target of a local human trafficker who also sent her mother to a brothel. Kusum was brought to Lusibari Badabon Trust by one of her relatives, Horen, who sent her to Canning to get rid of the human trafficker and to find her mother. She was determined to go alone to a new place. Later she was married off to a physically disable person and became the mother of a boy, Fakir. After the accidental death of her husband, she became utterly stranded. One night she met an old woman and her family who were politically forced to leave their country, Bangladesh, in 1970. The old women, along with many other Bangladeshis had moved to Morichjhapi, a small village in the mangrove forest, as it was assigned by the West Bengal Government for the refugees. But later the leftist government decided to evict the refugees to preserve the wildlife. However, the settlers decided not to move. Kusum too was adamant about not leaving the land as she thought like others

that they had a right to the land which was essential for their survival. To evict them the government deployed the gangsters who burnt the houses of the settlers, wasted their fields, and sank their boats so that they could not move. And then they brutally killed people and raped the women of the village. Kusum was one of the victims of the massacre.

Like the tragic lot of non-human animals such as dolphins, crabs, or tigers of the mangrove forest who are evicted as a result of human encroachment, the life of Kusum is also dominated and exploited by male-dominated society. Both refugees and the local people of the Archipelago are dependent on the islands. As a result, they sometimes intrude into protected areas set aside for the wild animals. Similarly, when a wild beast enters the local areas it also becomes a subject of `brutal revenge.

In order to restore the balance between human and non-human animals, Ghosh presents the folklore of Bon Bibi. The tiger god is worshipped by both Muslims and Hindus. Before the arrival of Bon Bibi to the tide country, it was ruled by the demon, Dokkhin Rai, who harbored hatred and an insatiable desire for human beings. Bon Bibi defeated the demon and restored peace in the locality by giving one-half of the forest to the demon and its disciple. The rest she kept for humans to restore the balance. To optimize balance in the natural and human worlds Ghosh prescribes the moral lesson of Bon Bibi which is not to cross boundaries. If nature is systematically degraded and dominated, it will end up with the destruction of the planet by “rational economy and global profit” (Coupe 120). The repetitions of the myth in the narrative exhibit Ghosh’s suggestion for ecological balance. To ensure diversity in cultural and biological life it is necessary to develop male reason and respect female nature.

### **Ecofeminism in *Jungle Nama*:**

A retelling of the legend of Bon Bibi in *Jungle Nama*, a verse story of the tiger god, illustrates Ghosh’s concern about women and nature. The legend brings to our notice that human greed ultimately leads to destruction. The unlimited greed of a cunning merchant, Dhona, creates chaos in the realm of the demon, Dokkhin Roi. Because of his greed, the life of the poor boy, Dukhi, was threatened as he became the target of the demon. It is because of the interference of Bon Bibi that Dukhi was saved from the demon. This is how the tiger god restore peace in the jungle. The premodern text shares certain concerns about natural resources and human greed. Ghosh connects the motif of the myth with the present-day crisis caused by the rich who want to be richer and affluent countries of the world who do not want to sacrifice their personal advantage for the greater benefit of the world. As Ghosh says in *The Jungle Nama*:

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’s learned, by way of this quest” (Ghosh)

Emphasizing the moral value of the myth of Bon Bibi, Bangladeshi eminent academic Professor Kaiser Haq in his book review “A Perennial philosophy: Amitav Ghosh’s ‘Jungle Nama’” accentuates the connection of myth with climate change “Bon Bibi propagates a perennial philosophy that humankind would do well to heed” (Haq). Addressing Ghosh as a “socially conscious fashioner” of narrative in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* he associates the moral of the myth with the present situation that enhances the possibility of the catastrophic end of the world due to the emission of carbon of some rich countries. He connects the motif of the myth with the present-day crisis caused by the rich who want to be richer and affluent countries of the world who do not want to sacrifice their personal advantage for the greater benefit of the world. This has been the dominant component running through Ghosh’s Sundarbans Trilogy. Ghosh is deeply involved in the politics of relentless development vis-à-vis climate change. He rejects the kind of development which leads to the devastation of natural resources. Like Alison Hawthorne, an eminent environmentalist, Ghosh believes that economic development should not be measured “in terms of financial loss and gain but in terms of the earth’s biological and cultural loss and gain” (14). Thus, to preserve the earth’s physiology is to further progress.

#### **Ecofeminism in *Gun Island*:**

It is noteworthy that Ghosh’s last novel, *Gun Island*, is a modern-day parable, woven around the legend of the snake goddess, Manasa. It is a story of travel and migration laced with myth and folktales and depicts the crisis of climate change. In the legend, Manasa Devi represents the natural world or ecological concerns. Being a goddess, she is also the embodiment of mother nature. So, the destructions of natural resources by human beings with profit-making motives are against the interest of the goddess. Like the original myth of Chand Sadager, the Gun Merchant thought himself rich and clever enough not to defer to the goddess of snakes. To establish her rule, Monosha Devi needed the homage of both humans and animals (snakes). She had to plead, cajole, and persuade him to let him do her bidding. In order to run away from the persecution of the goddess Manasa Devi, patron of snakes, and all venomous creatures, he had to travel across lands and oceans and encountered endless trouble.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh portrays the displacement and migration of humans and how difficult life is for those who need to leave their countries and families behind. Tipu and Rafi are present-day gun merchants. They are willing to risk everything for a chance for a better life, even if this means embarking on a perilous journey during which they have to face merciless and inhumane treatment. Besides, when migrants finally reach their "destination", they often encounter additional problems. Being illegal immigrants, they are not welcome and are left alone on a boat in the middle of the sea to wait for help. So it is the greed of human beings that ultimately leads to their destruction. Ghosh asserts “Chand Sadagar is the human character, a trader. And how do we see the downfall of human? We see it unfolding because of his greed. These are universal themes, the prospect of finite natural resources and the human penchant for extraction at all costs” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXNfoiF6VQQ>).

Like Chand Sadagar or the gun merchant, the fortune seeker migrants encounter endless trouble on *Gun Island*. Due to the unlimited greed of human beings, great damage is inflicted on the environment. With each increase of carbon, methane, or other greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere, our local weather and global climate are further agitated, heated, and boiled. Global warming is assessed by the increase in the average global temperature of the Earth. Along with our currently increasing average global temperature some parts of Earth may actually get colder while other parts get warmer—hence the notion of average global temperature. Greenhouse gas causing atmospheric heating and agitation also increases the unpredictability of the weather and climate and dramatically increases the severity, scale, and frequency of storms, droughts, wildfires, and extreme temperatures. In *Gun Island*, the beaching of the dolphins on the shore of Gorjontola, devastating wildfire in Los Angeles, the gradual sinking of Venice in the lake, oceanic dead zone in the Bay of Bengal due to low oxygen content, dislocation of poisonous snakes, spiders and worms are all consequences of climate change. It may also cause some incurable diseases.

The destructive power of such disease is even more perceptible as the world faces a pandemic, corona, now. For the last two years and more, the world is experiencing the horror of the disease. Though vaccines have been invented and are quite available now they took a lot of time and cost the loss of so many lives. Like any other natural phenomenon, women are more affected by the pandemic as it leaves them totally helpless and defenseless. They are an underprivileged community so they are always deprived of any facilities which are provided by the government or any other international organization.

#### **A Solution to the Problem Raised by Ecofeminism during Pandemic:**

In order to save humanity, it is high time we pay attention to mother nature. Gender discrimination too is a worldwide problem that keeps a larger portion of the population underprivileged. If we cannot ensure gender justice, we all will be losers. Climate change affects the women of the coastal areas of the Sundarbans badly.

During pandemics, gender discrepancy grows faster. Women become targets of violence and social and economic insufficiency. The Gender Gap report of 2021 of the World Economic Forum exhibits that Covid-19 disrupts economic and social development. It also multiplies gender discrepancy. Due to Covid-19 people had to stay at home. Many of them lost their professions. Developed countries could provide help to the people. But developing countries like us could not provide help. During pandemics, people lose their job. Financial insecurity creates tension. As a result, people become violent. Pandemic also disrupts mental health. Women could not avail of medical treatment. Many of them lost their jobs as they were less frequent to go outside. The rise of sea level will eliminate many cultivated lands. Due to global warming, the rise of sea level will submerge the coastal area of the Sundarbans which will cause displacements. Women are the most vulnerable when it comes to this crisis.

Without thinking about the personal benefit, we should love each other. In order to guarantee a green world for future generations, we need to ban fossil fuels, the major cause of global warming.

In Ghosh's telling the mythical Manasa Devi turns out to be Mother Nature who takes revenge on her disciples as they forget their duties and responsibilities to the world. Their continuous negligence brings the world on the verge of a catastrophic ending. It is high time to pay attention and take the necessary steps to save the forest as well as the world. With this aim in view, the world leaders seat together to ensure diminishing global warming by reducing carbon gas as fuel in Glasgow Summit COP-26 from 30 October to 12 November. The intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that achieving global net-zero emissions by 2050 is the minimum needed to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and above pre-industrial levels. The Executive Secretary of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Patricia Espinosa, says "the failure of this summit will be dangerous. It can destroy world security and sustainability. If they fail to reduce the emission of greenhouse gas, the increasing immigration and food deficiency will be the reason for conflicts and mismanagement" (31).

In an interview, Ghosh alerts the world by saying that the negative impacts of climate change have already been started and it is growing faster. So, industrially developed countries should come forward to save the underdeveloped or developing countries immediately. Ghosh also suggests a world where a human being will be sympathetic to fellow beings, particularly the underprivileged, in his Sundarbans Trilogy. Taking responsibility, caring, and acting are all that can bring some changes. He also mentions the need for "collective action" to solve the problems created by climate change. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DyV7b7tsPQ>)

## CONCLUSION

In short, Amitav Ghosh depicts female characters, including human and supernatural, are the target of discrimination in his present works. Like mother nature, they are degraded, dominated, and exploited. The exploitation of the female community and mother nature ultimately creates crises for all. In *The Hungry Tide*, *Jungle Nama* and *Gun Island* Ghosh's concern about the existential crisis that may occur due to such negligence are depicted. Besides, natural calamities, pandemics can also paralyze the world which can occur due to ecological imbalance. He believes that only by caring for and loving other people, humanity will be able to care for and protect mother earth. In order to save humanity from any disaster, we should be respectful to each other to nature as well as ensure gender justice.

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